DAD'S NUKE (part 1)
by Marc Laidlaw

Table of Contents

THE BEST DEFENSE 4
HOME MOVIES 11
WALL TO WALL 22
HYPOCRITICAL MASS 27
SOMETHING FROM THE OVEN 34
BLACK SHEPHERD 42
OUR UNNATURAL RESOURCES 51

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FOR GERALDINE
On All Fool's Day,
1985

From:
FAMILY HEAD—THE JOHNSONS
For Intra-Family Use Only
Re: F.N.S. May 1998 Fuel Demand Forecast

June 18, 1998
FAMILY MEMBERS:

The Family/Neighbor Solidarity (FNS) Fuel Demand Committee, consisting of parents in the Laurel Woods and Cobblestone Hill residential compounds, recently released its biennial May 1998 gas demand projections. The end results are very similar to the Johnson family's own forecasts.

An overall fuel demand growth rate of 1.5 percent is forecast for the 1999 through 2020 period. The Johnson family forecasts a 1.3 percent rate over the 1999 through 2020 period. FNS's baseline forecast, by way of contrast, projects a 0.7 percent growth rate.

Many of the underlying assumptions of the FNS and Johnson forecasts are similar.

- The only significant increases above 1998 levels are projected in the educational and entertainment areas. In these areas, cogeneration is expected to have slight potential for new load. Positive growth results from the introduction of nuclear technology in some nontraditional uses such as procreation. Much of the remaining increase is a recovery of load from the recession and unfavorable oil/gas price ratios.
- Residential demand is not projected to grow because increases in number of family members are offset by conservation.
- Electric generation growth is also stagnant since nuclear power is projected to replace baseload oil and gas units, this load being only partially replaced by combined-cycle units. The Johnson's use of natural gas is expected to decrease until 2010 due to the installation of garage-based nuclear units. After 2010, extension of service lives allows generation load to recover, but not to earlier levels.

All the forecasts discussed show the importance of nuclear purchasing, new nuclear generation technologies to recover lost electric generation load, a favorable oil-to-gas price ratio achieved through rate design to recover neighborhood boiler load, cogeneration supply absorption, and new applications for fuel. Even so, total Johnson load in 2020 will barely exceed 1998 levels, despite projected enhanced recovery of sales. There is great potential for profit, however, in the sale of excess nuclear-generated energy to the Cartel.

WM. D. "DAD" JOHNSON

WDJ (x3397):pjj
Cc: C.R. Johnson
V.L. Johnson
P.J. Johnson
N.J. Johnson
L.B. Johnson (1 & 2)
S.T. Johnson
W.D. Johnson, Jr.

It was a day ripe for the picking. Skin would tan and hair would bleach, for the fog had burned away early that morning and might not come back again—ever. That was how Dad felt. From the summit of Cobblestone Hill, looking down Arch Street between the orderly diagram of lawns and sidewalks and kicked kickballs and regular dogs sitting like ornaments and kids of various sizes and shapes (though all styled alike) and especially the pleasingly similar houses, he could see the ocean. Green and gray, glassy, it seemed to come right up to the hillside and stop at the westernmost of the lawns. The fact that its upper limit, the horizon, was an almost perfectly straight line was to him a source of real satisfaction. The few fluffy, shimmery clouds kept above that line, as if the sea were off-limits, and there weren't enough of the fleecy things to pose any kind of threat; they weren't about to band together and form a fog bank. They were independent, like Dad. Floaters. Just hanging out, waiting to see what they could get away with. Maybe they were goners, but not Dad. Today he knew for sure that he could get away with anything. By the time the sun had set, Dad would have made some kind of conquest. Yep. He had high hopes. He could already hear the snickers of the victory parade, though it might be a parade of one or two and it would only lead across the street between Jock Smith's house and Dad's house. And it might be more like a sprint than a leisurely parade. Smith would be pissed at Dad. That was as certain as the death of those clouds in the heat of the day.

Damn those clouds anyway. There were more of them now.

Dad didn't want to stand around and watch his morning get spoiled, so he went back inside.

Sensing his resident's I.D-implant, the gates opened automatically for him, a series of micro-thin tungsten-alloy lamellas sliding into the juniper bushes one after the other until he came to the welcome mat. At the door, even Dad had to prove who he was by means of voice-pattern recognitions—a coy good morning conversation with the sentry-comp—and a discreet minty tongue print. Fingerprints could be altered, but no one was going to mess around surgically with his tongue just to break into the Johnson house; Dad didn't have much worth stealing, when you got right down to it, except for his state-of-the-art security and defense systems. It looked like Wolfie had been at the kids' tongue touchpad, lower on the wall—not that the twins minded.

Wow! The smell of breakfast came at him like some kind of burglar-repellent through the opening door, borne on a current of soiled diapers, dog musk, unrecycled trash. He almost turned and went back out, but then his nose got past the smells that were fixtures and singled out the transitory odor of bacon and buttered toast and scrambled eggs. That, he thought, is more like it.

"Get it while it's hot," called Connie Johnson, more widely known as Mom, from the kitchen. "Bill, is that you?"

"No," he said softly, "it's Jock Smith come right through your intruder-ionizing perimeter and over your welcome mat, hoping for a look at tender little Stephanie in her bath, or maybe a roll in the shag with Lyndon Baines and Lady Bird, one at either end."

She couldn't hear him, of course, even as he crept toward the kitchen through the living room's tumble of toys and clothes and broken Etch-A-Sketches. For Jock to have secretly penetrated Dad's defenses and seduced the twins into illicit gymnastics, he would have to be smarter and even more depraved than he looked. This was Dad's worst fear, which he fed daily on a diet of rumor and suspicion. He had considered sending his highly developed fantasies of Smith's obscene proclivities—signed "Anonymous" —to the Leaf
and Cobble Neighborhood News, but a nagging fear of incrimination had dissuaded him. There was something of a romance between his own Nancy June and the carbuncular Arnold Smith, the Romeo-andJuliet aspects of which had not escaped him. Eventually he counted upon Nancy to spy upon the elder Smith in his own household.

His first sight of the breakfast table, hard-won considering the obstacles of grape juice puddles and teflex street-skates, hardly seemed worth it. A battle had been fought there with forks and knives and bared teeth. He felt like a scavenger loping into no man's land, nothing left but a few half-eaten remains, and Wolfie was already getting to those. The children, except for Steph and William D. Jr. in facing highchairs, had been and gone; thus the unaccustomed silence.

But Connie, dear heart, had at least saved something for him. She tore the cover from the insta-serve and handed him the steaming plate.

"That's my girl," he said.

She gave him a Sungleam smile, one she had picked up from the pictures of model housewives he had liked so much on the boxes of Sungleam appliances. How quickly they learn, he thought now. After seven kids and another on the way, she's finally getting the hang of it.

"Were you rototilling?" she asked. He didn't think she knew what the word meant, but she liked it and kept repeating it. Every time he got off work, she asked if he'd been rototilling.

"No, nothing like that," he said. "Just checking on our neighbors. I don't see that Smith has anything to get excited about, judging from his front yard. Same old muzzles under the eaves. His paint's peeling though." He laughed aloud at

that. "Weatherproof, my ass. I told him when he put it on last year there's no such thing as weatherproof. Weather gets through no matter what you do." "The launcher is in his backyard," Connie said.

"Huh?"

She turned away to the sink, ran blue water from the disposal tap, and watched the silver insta-serve trays dissolve in her hands beneath the flow. "I had coffee with Doris the other day and—"

He choked on a little ball of scrambled egg. "Coffee with Doris Smith? In her house? You go over there alone?"

"Sometimes. When Jock's on work," she said. "I saw it in the back—"

"You don't take the kids over there, do you? Stephanie or the twins?"

"What does it matter? Of course I take them." She turned off the water, dried her hands, and yelled at Wolfie to get off the table. "I knew you'd get all worked up about it; honestly, I wasn't going to say anything, but I thought you might want to know about the launcher."

Dad's imagination was too vivid to let him speak for a moment. He saw Jock Smith coming off work, pulling his hands from the sensi-gloves, peeling the psycho-pad from his brow and eyes and spotting helpless little William D. Jr. sitting on a counter somewhere or eating dice in a corner; saw the slow, wicked smile on the swarthy cratered face; saw him come toward the stupid-faced baby with a decidedly lecherous look in his dilated pupils.

"It was covered with a tarp," Connie said, "but I don't know. It looked pretty big to me."

"It's kit-built," Dad said, and slammed his hand down on the countertop. Wm. D. Jr. made a startled noise and something dribbled from the highchair onto the synoleum. "Nothing that Jock Smith put together from a kit is going to change the balance of power in my neighborhood."

Connie didn't say anything. Her head was in the wall unit, like something to be baked. She came out with a child's chartreuse tennis shoe.

"How did this get in here?"

"I'm telling you, Connie, I'm not afraid of any kit. It's got to have a weak point. The missile itself may be a tough piece of hardware, but I'll bet the console's fragile. No one ever thinks to protect the controls. You might be surprised to hear—"

"I wouldn't be surprised by anything you told me, Bill. All I know is that Doris said the missiles were in the garage in several pieces because they were too big to fit any other way, and that launcher was enormous. You could tell that even under the tarp."

"Tarps make anything look enormous to you," he said, the definitive quality of his statement putting an end to the conversation.

Connie sighed and unstrapped Stephanie from her chair. She leashed the toddler to the counter, watched for a moment as she weaved slightly from her breakfast soporifics, then took a mop to the varicolored mess under Wm. D. Jr.'s chair.

Wm. D. Sr. was upset for a number of reasons. Those clouds had come in all right, and it looked like something worse than afternoon fog. It looked like rain.

"A kit!" he said, and slammed his hand and the insta-serve platter and everything down in the middle of the kitchen table. Junior screamed, blanching, and shuddered so hard that his highchair shook.

"Don't scare him, Bill," said Connie. "It makes him wet."

Dad listened to the liquid raining on the kitchen floor, then looked at his youngest son—the squashed, mongoloid features. He began to smile as an idea took root.

That fogbank of gloom didn't stand a chance. It might take some doing, but Dad had his secret weapon.

***

When he came downstairs an hour later, snapping his infrascan binoculars into the case, Connie was still in the kitchen.

"I'm making my famous oriental fried noodles," she said.

"Oh?"

"I don't know what it is about potlucks, Bill. They're a little scary. Maybe it's because no one dares bring insta-serves. I know a few of the girls are good cooks, Doris for instance, and they can make what they buy at the supermarket taste like real food. But there are some women—oh my. I think when they get inside the super they panic and buy whatever's near the door, so they can get away. And then when they cook . . . I don't think they know what smoke means; they can't taste the difference between bread pudding and burnt pudding. And they don't know how to season. Do you remember Mrs. Baker's lemon-frosted Bundt cake with the hot green chili stuffing? The best I can ever think of to say at

these things is that it tastes just like insta-serves, but that's usually a lie. It's a good thing Elaine Wesson can cook; I'd hate to think of Virgil marrying someone who couldn't."

Dad stared at her for a good long time. This was her equivalent of rototilling. What the hell was she talking about?

She gave the dish a final toss, the better to mix the crispy noodles with the creamed corn and garbanzo beans.

"You sure that's the right recipe?" Dad asked. "I don't remember it looking like that when your sorority mother made it."

"That was twelve years ago, Bill. Recipes change."

Twelve years was a long time, he thought. Time enough to raise a twenty-three-year-old son—Virgil Lamarck—and a string of others. Number eight, Erica Valentine Johnson, was due in two weeks, though you wouldn't have guessed it by looking at Connie. These days it was hard to tell anything much by looking at her; each morning she arranged her expression by shifting the mortice joints of her high, inlaid cheekbones, after a night of sleeping on her belly had crumpled her face. At the moment she looked aloof, pleased with herself. It was an easy pregnancy, as they all were now. Erica Valentine Johnson was halfway across the neighborhood, fleshing out nicely in the time-bake oven, in line with Dad's innovative specifications.

Connie checked the kitchen clock, put a lid on the casserole, and yelled at the thunder upstairs, where their children were supposed to be getting ready.

The twins came down first and hurried to swing from Dad's hands and legs.

He said, "I took a look over ol' Smith's roof and didn't see anything more dangerous than a robin's nest over there." He shook the twins from him and handed P.J. the binoculars as he hit the bottom of the stairs. "Run these back up to my office, would you,
Peej?"

P.J., almost eighteen now, twitched a wan lip and almost said something to his father—some typically rebellious, late-adolescent thing—but then he seemed to think twice and suppress it. So, he was coming out of that phase; and about time. Dad winked at Connie as P.J., doing what he was told for a change, ran back upstairs.

"Well," she said, "you believe what you like about the launcher,
Bill. You'll see it soon enough. It's lying down probably."

"That just shows what you know about missile launchers," he said. He rubbed his hands together and beamed down at Wm. D. Jr. "Come on, let's keep this show moving. I'm, uh, anxious to congratulate Jock."

As usual, they seemed to advance in slow motion in spite of the frenzy of activity in the house: the twins vibrated rapidly from wall to wall; tall, thin Virgil waded with dignity through the sea of smaller bodies, a sweater about his shoulders, untouched by the chaos and also contributing nothing to their progress; Nancy June screamed at the other children, except for Wm. D. Jr., because she didn't want to clean up his mess. P.J. was upstairs until almost the last minute fetching things for his father: a windbreaker, a pinochle deck, antacid mints.

"Are we all ready?" Dad called.

There was general agreement from those able to give it. Connie slipped Stephanie's leash around her wrist and picked up the casserole and then Junior; no one could keep Wolfie from following them out the front door. When they were outside, Connie gasped.

"This is the first sun I've felt in a week," she said. "It feels like a blessing. You know, Bill, after all the work I do, I'm going to enjoy myself. It's been so long since I've seen any of the other wives, except Doris. I was thinking . . . I might even get drunk, if that's what it takes. Nobody's going to spoil my afternoon, I'm determined.
I am going to have fun."

Dad smiled, feeling a little sorry for her. Good luck, he thought.

With a twin seemingly surgically affixed to either hand, he took his first step across the safety of his front lawn and led his family into the street.

Bring on the bombs, Smith, he thought. Bring 'em on. Built 'em with your own hands, did you? Well, it looks it, old boy, it looks it.

The Smiths' house looked much like the Johnsons'—almost too much, he found himself thinking, which was a disturbing way of looking at it when he could appreciate the symmetry of repetition in every other house along the streets of Cobblestone Hill. Of course, Smith's paint was peeling; it was tan, like the paint on the other houses, but it was of cheaper grade. And Smith had never managed to disguise his artillery nearly so neatly as Dad had done. Here and there, among the flowers in their beds, one could see the obviously fake lawn-lamps with their vari-directional nozzles for swift sprinkling of explosive pellets. Underslung like wasps' nests beneath the second-story eaves, cameras and laser barrels winked at the Johnsons as they came up the brick-lined walkway to the practically naked front door. There was nothing to stop you from getting to the door, no alloy plates. Smith had tried installing them last summer, and had nearly ruined the front of his house in the attempt.

Dad laughed, remembering the whole affair.

By the time they reached the front door, he could see that it was unlocked. That didn't surprise him. Pretending that he was an uninvited assassin, he slipped over the threshold, whispering at the twins to be silent, and they glided down the hall toward the sound of voices at the back of the house.

Dad stopped and let the kids slip past him. "You all go on out there now, act normal, mix with 'em." "Sure, dad," said P.J.

"Why wouldn't we?" said Virgil.

As Connie squeezed past him, he said, "Here, hon, let me help you with Junior."

She handed the baby to him gratefully, but the leash slipped down her arm and she almost lost Stephanie. "Oh, no, she's waking up." The toddler strained down the hall, pulling her mother along, almost snapping the leash. "Nancy, did you bring her pills like I asked you?"

Dad watched them turn the corner at the end of the hall, then he whinnied gently, so as not to frighten Junior, and walked quietly toward the living room. It was dark, silent, clean of toys, but light streamed from the bar in the next room, and the patio beyond. He heard the Smiths and their guests welcoming the incomplete Johnson family into the backyard, and P.J. said loudly, "Holy cow! Is that it?"

Dad was a little unnerved by that, as P.J. was a hard one to impress. But then it was probably still under the tarp, and things under tarps looked impressive to teenagers.

He walked quietly to the division of the bar and living room, hoping for a quick look through the back window at the patio, the better to map things out; but Smith had adjusted his Levelor blinds so that while plenty of light came in from above, there was no view. He was standing there, unsure of his next move, Junior drooling on his shoulder, when he heard a soft squeak of deck shoes and that voice—that hateful voice—the voice that could belong to none other than Jock Smith himself.

Dad turned around slowly, with a painful smile, and found himself facing a silhouette.

"Hiya, Bill," said Smith, coming forward into the light with his hand held out as if to snatch Junior away. Smith looked so normal that for a moment Dad wondered why he disliked him so much. That's part of his danger, he reminded himself. Such a normal looking character, insidious. The kind who'd sneak up on your wife, or she upon him, and at the last instant—as he entered her, for instance—he would molt: in one shuddering shrug all that normalcy would slough away around his feet, revealing some unimaginable fiend.

He was all surface, Jock Smith. Dad prided himself on the fact that he was normal to the marrow. Normal height, blood type, shoe size, aspirations, income, everything. That was why he would triumph.

"Hey, Jock, old boy," he said, and slapped Jock's shoulder, jiggling his highball glass so that it slopped.

"Glad you could make it, would you like a drink?" Jock's voice was high, a little manic. "I guess so if you're looking for the bar. I moved everything out onto the patio where we could get at it. Come on out, Bill, I want you to see my baby."

Smith turned and walked back the way he had come, and as Bill followed, hanging behind a few feet, he mumbled for Junior's ears only, "His baby, did you hear that? His baby is a ground-to-air missile. It makes you wonder about his kids."

"What was that?" Jock said, rounding on him suddenly in the hall.

"Oh, nothing, just talking to Junior here, baby talk like he understands. Goo-goo, Junior. Goo-goo ga-ga."

"Well, Bill Johnson," said a woman's voice, "I do believe that's the cleverest thing I've ever heard you say."

Dad smiled so hard that his eyes closed, and when he opened them, reluctantly, it was to see Doris Smith giving him that kooky grin she had. Crooked teeth, which Jock had apparently never offered to have fixed, made her mouth look like a kid's drawing of
"Mommy."

He shoved past her, calling for Connie at the top of his voice, and stumbled right out through the sliding glass door and onto the crowded patio. In his haste to avoid conversation with Doris, he was completely unprepared for his first sight of the thing beneath the tarp.

"Holy shit!" he said, and almost dropped Wm. D. Jr.

The object, of which only the lower parts—truck tires and hydraulic legs—were visible, took up virtually all of Smith's backyard, excluding the cement patio where the guests were standing, staring. Seeing their slack-jawed expressions, Dad knew that he had blown it. With all his plans of coming in coolly, surveying the kit, and shrugging it off, he had relaxed his guard for an instant and given Smith the pleasure of seeing him caught by surprise, like every other dumb animal at the potluck. Dad swore it would never happen again, and that he would make up for it this very afternoon.

"It's something, isn't it?" said Marv Coolidge, Dad's gullible coworker. Marv limped toward him and offered him a drink.

"It's something, all right," Dad said, recovering his composure now. Out of the corner of his eye he caught Smith watching him, so he smiled and raised his glass in a sardonic toast. "Nice work, Jock."

Smith's head bobbed. He stood with one arm on an electronic cabinet and console, the whole set-up in the shade under a big yellow lawn umbrella. Dad could hear a fan whirring in the cabinet; there were vents all along the back and a ventilation grill on top, and wires running everywhere. It was a vulnerable-looking system, considering the size of the launcher.

Dad thought he was ready to look at the launcher again. He wasn't going to freak out this time. After all, it was under a tarp; there was no telling how big it really was.

But it wasn't a tarp, it was a parachute, and covered or not, it took up the whole lawn, reaching from corner to corner; the swing set and jungle gym had been forced back into the banana plants.
The undercarriage alone looked like it could have supported a house.

"I told you it was lying down," Connie said in his ear.

"Lying down?" he said, tearing his eyes from the thing. "And I told you, you don't know the first thing about ground-to-air missile launchers. Something that big doesn't lie down—"

"Oh, but it does, Bill."

He turned around. Doris again. Smith's cockamamie wife looked cross-eyed; no doubt she'd had a few too many. That was why she thought a launcher could lie down.

"It lifts up for launching," she said. "You'll see, Bill." She turned toward her husband. "Jock, don't you think it's about time?"

"Well, I guess," he said, obviously relishing the suspense. Everyone was gesturing at the thing, some were trying to lift the parachute for glimpses.

Smith called his kids together and directed them to take the edges of the parachute. Nancy June helped Arnold with his share. Dad moved back from the unveiling, into the shade of the yellow umbrella, and set Wm. D. Jr. down on top of the control cabinet, next to the console keyboard. Junior laughed at the breeze that came up from the vents.

"Thataboy," Dad said.

Everyone else said, "Hey!"

Dad took a slow, restrained look at the now naked giant.

The launcher itself was insignificant by comparison to what lay upon it: a long tapered cylinder, two meters in diameter at the fat end, with a white body, a red payload cap, and three thin silver fins running a quarter of its length.

"Watcha got in there, Jocko?" somebody wanted to know, a dip from Smith's office, no doubt. "That's not a nuke warhead, is it?"

"Nah," Smith said. "Didn't want to waste explosives on a demonstration."

"A demo?" Marv said. "You're gonna show us this thing in action? Well, come on, Jock, hop to it."

Doris sidled toward Dad and said, "Now you can see it really stand up."

He flinched from her voice and unpleasant memories. That nutty smile, those goofy eyes, her laughter cutting him in bed.

"You're sweet, Doris," he said, covering Junior's ears. "Really sweet."

"I'm so glad you care, Bill."

What had he ever seen in her? It must have been the thrill of his first affair. She went away to gloat with the other wives as her old man sauntered over to the console and pulled up a lawn chair. "Speech!" someone yelled. "Let's make this a real inauguration." "God, no," Dad said.

Jock looked at him, uncomprehending, then turned back to the crowd of admirers.

"Thanks, thank you, everybody." They quieted, beaming at him, drinks in hand; the biggest smiles went along with the biggest glasses. "We, uh, we stand on the brink of a new age in community defense."

"Hear, hear!"

"My missile may be the first in this neighborhood, but it will almost certainly not be the last. I hope that we can all build our solidarity and protect our independence as a residential compound by solid investments in affordable defensive technology. When those planes come circling overhead and the ships come in from the West to soil our pure beaches, why neighbors, we've got to be ready to blast them out of the sky and sink them under the waves."

"You tell it, Jock!"

"When those subverts come knocking at our walls for free handouts or building permits, we've got to show 'em the barrels of our guns before we show 'em the door. What I'm talking about is protecting our investments, ladies and gentlemen, making our homes safe for our children and our children's children and so forth. We must make our part of

America, no matter how small, the strongest part. Let us join together in friendship and trust, with a true community spirit, and keep the others out."

Dad found the applause unbelievable. First of all, it was practically the same speech Dad had given at the last Compound meeting. Secondly, all the talk about defense against external threats was just so much bullshit: the real threat came from within the community, from men like Smith himself. Dad knew that this was Smith's real game. That missile wasn't intended for any low-flying bomber or off-course Jap shrimp-boat: it was meant to fly the width of Arch Street, from Smith's house to Dad's house, and the explosion would be just big enough to reduce the latter from a two-story manor to a subsurface crater without more than superficial damage to the paint on Smith's house. That was Smith's whole idea.

Dad stood aside as Jock came back to his lawn chair and started running routines on the console keyboard. He gave Junior a salted peanut to play with.

"Don't lean on that, Bill, please," Jock said.

Dad stood back from the cabinet, spreading his arms and his smile. "You want me to take Junior down? He's put on weight."

Jock just chuckled, shaking his head. Dad could see him feeling sorry for the little retard. Wait a few minutes, he thought.

Dad heard a buzz and turned to look at the launcher. It was standing up, like Doris had said. The missile lifted its red bulbous nose to the sky, the fuel nozzles tipped toward the lawn sprinklers. P.J. pulled Wolfie away. The heads of spectators fell back as the missile stood taller and taller. It rose until its payload shell was higher than the orange tree, higher even than the rooster weathervane on Smith's roof.

Dad swallowed. You wouldn't even have to put explosives in that thing to ruin a house: just drop it from a height and it would make quite an impression wherever it hit.

"Arnold," Jock said, "you want to turn on your shield?"

"Sure, Dad," Arnold said, running onto the grass. He had something like a remote control box in his hand, and he went to every corner of the lawn checking little bulb-studded stakes against some meter on the box. Dad heard him explaining to one of the other kids that this was a prototype model wave-field shield of his own design, something he'd come up with in school, whose practical aspects for the community should be obvious: it would make regular walls obsolete. That Arnold was a clever kid.

"Get back on the cement," Arnold said. "If you're caught in the shield it'll chop you in half."

Everyone stepped back. Arnold flipped a toggle. The air in the yard seemed to catch and hold, forming a flat screen, then a box that enclosed the grassy area. It rolled a bit, as if the vertical hold were out of synch, but Arnold adjusted it until it held steady.

Arnold had found an audience in Nancy June, and he went on regaling her with descriptions of his invention while she nodded politely. "The best thing about this shield is that it powers itself with the energy of the blast. It's exactly as strong as it has to be."

Most of the crowd was more interested in the missile than the shield, however. Its head poked over the top of the shimmering walls, raring to go.

All this, in a way, Dad had been counting on. He had suspected that a simple unveiling of the long-touted missile would not be enough, that a launching was inevitable. But as he had expected all along, it would be possible to steal the show. The sheer size of the thing, that had thrown him for a second; but with tiny things, like the chips in the control system, he was on familiar ground. He patted Junior on the head, beamed happily down at Jock Smith as the other's fingers roamed over the keyboard, inputting final coordinates and configurations.

"Okay," Smith said, "there's going to be a little light and noise. We'll see it go straight into the ocean." He made the last entry with his pinky.

Light and noise was the least of it. Sight failed, eardrums temporarily ceased to thrum, people staggered sideways. Dad held onto Junior, laughing at the top of his lungs, aware that his youngest son was bawling and, no doubt, other things.

It was as he had hoped. If the sound of a raised voice was enough to trigger Junior's discharge, the effect of this blast must have been enormous.

He scooped up the child, felt the spatter of warm urine tossed back by the fan in the console, smelled ozone, and caught a whiff of burning. But the missile, inside the transparent cage that held its fires and fumes imprisoned, was making quite a stink itself, and Junior's little mess, like Dad's disappearance, was hardly noticed.

Swiftly down the hall with Wolfie at his heels, out the front door, across the street, through the sliding panels, a quick lick of mint, then up the stairs and into his office: Dad had the blinds thrown up and the binoculars pulled out in half a second, his triumphant hoots of laughter echoing out the window and onto the street where now he heard

shouting, even screams, though they were not as loud as Junior whining in the lounge chair. People ran over Smith's lawn, looking not toward the sea but to the south, their eyes and fingers still aimed high, but then quite suddenly dropping straight down and catching Dad in the window. Doris yelled . . .

He ducked from the window, ran down the hall into Virgil's room, and raised his binoculars to examine the southern view. There were the hills of Laurel Woods, green in early summer, the thin black walls around them, and there the emerald expanse of the golf course on rolling mounds and cliffs above the sea. Many a day he had strolled through there, teaching Virgil the sport, taking springy steps on the soft grass, wading into the shallow pond after balls caught in the sand trap below the pine and eucalyptus grove.

And now into his memories, soaring down at a dreamy angle, came a flashing arrow of white and silver, the tiniest blur of red at its tip. The pennants at the sixteenth hole, the sand trap, flapped in the sea breeze. There were no clouds, no threat of fog. There was only the sleek missile sliding in across the blue.

Then the explosion of earth, green and brown flying everywhere, a few little men running, the edge of the cliff sheared into the sea.

Hole in one.

Dad stood up, tucking the binoculars back in their case. Downstairs he heard the steel panels sliding shut, protecting his family as they ran into the house. He was safe and secure. No one could even get to his door to knock upon it. Just let them try. They all knew what kind of defenses he had put into his home, his castle.

Connie came to the doorway, panting, weeping. "What have you done to us, Bill? What have you done?"

"There, there," he said, putting a strong arm around her. "My nose is clean. It's Junior they'll be wanting."

Dear Dad:

The time has come to tell you what I

No, that wasn't it at all.
Peter John Johnson cleared the screen he was working on and tried again.

Dear Dad:

The thing is, Dad, that you are an asshole—an unmitigated, uncompromising asshole. If you could hear half the things the people in Cobblestone Hill say about you, you would probably sh

Footsteps sounded on the stairs, approaching the door to the study. P.J. cleared the screen again and turned on a recording that no voice-recognition computer could transform into readable prose. Wm. D. Johnson spoke intermittently, between snorts and pauses:

"Now I'm sure really—uh, I do feel godawful about the—well, damn, the golf course getting wrecked up, sure. Who'd have thought it would land there, of all places? I didn't think it would get off the ground once, uh, the-the-the—oh, the hell with, it, I didn't do anything and my kid didn't do anything. It's a mistake anyone could make. That suspicious bastard Smith is making a big deal out of—"

The footsteps, heavy and easily identifiable, stopped in the hall, and P.J. heard the door swing open, brushing the shag. He swiftly went on with his transcription, which read:

GENTLEMEN OF THE WHELK LODGE COUNCIL:

I offer my heartfelt apologies for any inconvenience that may have resulted from the accident that occurred last week, and which Mr. Jock Smith claims was deliberate sabotage to himself and the Laurel Woods golf course. Also, allow me to convey herein the apologies of my son, William D. Johnson, Jr., who is unable to express his own dismay at this unfortunate turn of events. I am sure you can understand the displeasure of a father who, after months of patient endeavor, discovers at an inopportune moment the inability of his own flesh and blood to absorb and retain the basic lessons of sanitary politesse. Yet he is young, and there is still hope for

"How's it going, kiddo?" said Dad, putting a hand on his shoulder. Oh, P.J. thought, my friends aren't allowed to see me; I'm low on Vitamin K because you've always got me in here typing up your stupid memos; I'd be afraid to go outside anyway because Mr. Smith is crazy and he'd like to get ahold of one of us; and I wish I could pull your half of my genes out of my cells and go on without them so that maybe I could get something done besides coming up with ways of killing myself.

"Okay," P.J. said, shrugging. "I think I've come up with a good apology."

The hand dropped from his shoulder.

"Good, good, glad to hear it. Don't worry, though; they'll never call me on the carpet. I've been a Whelk too long. More likely they'll be putting me on the Council."

Dad seemed nervous. He cleared his throat, coughed into his fist. "Hey, I see your typing is improving. That's damn good; it's really important. You've got to get in there and build those skills right into the old reflexes, the muscle and marrow, right smack into the DNA, so that you don't have to think about it. You've got to have perfect accuracy, Peej. Keep your wrists straight, don't let 'em hang like
that. Well . . . I guess it's okay if they hang."

"I know, Dad."

Dad warmed to his pep talk. "You've got to have perfect accuracy and you've got to type at least 110 words a minute, not counting glossary strings. You've got to have it all down, kid, and you have to get it while you're young. Then . . . then you can really go somewhere. When you've got all that you'll be able to slip into the gloves and really move. The sooner you go, the farther you'll go faster. By the time you're ready for a job, boy, you've got to be flying."

"You wanted this letter out by three o'clock, Dad."

"Oh, did I? Did I say that? Well, say, Peej, store what you've got and let it cool for awhile. I, uh, your mother and I want to have a word with you."

Oh great, he thought.

He stored the screenload, stood up, and looked at Dad standing profiled in the doorway, the increasingly bloated yet flaccid belly blocking any possibility of escape. When Dad saw that he was coming, he turned away and went down the hall toward his office.

Dad held the door open for him.

"Hi, Mom," P.J. said.

She sat on the black leather accessory footstool that accompanied Dad's lounge chair. Her smile was compressed, and there was something in her eyes—some emotion or concern—that overpowered the anger she'd been holding there all week since the potluck disaster. She looked nervous, intense.

Dad sat down in his lounger, almost hidden from view behind the desk console. His dark eyes fixed on P.J. as he said, "Have a seat, son."

"Thanks." P.J. pulled up a chair at the corner of the desk, so that he could see both of them. His mother reached out and patted his knee.

"Peter," she said.

"Son," Dad said at the same time.

They looked at each other, and Dad deferred to her with a little nod. By the time she looked back at him, he felt claustrophobic, despite her reassuring smile.

"Peter, we love you very much," she said. "You're very special to both of us."

"I love you, too, Mom," he said with a quaver in his voice that wasn't there when he finally said, "And Dad."

"And we've always had your best interest at heart, that you be happy with us, that you be glad to be part of the family."

"Sure, Mom," he said, his throat suddenly dry. "I'm glad."

She smiled and sat up; she had been leaning ever closer to him, as had Dad. Dad was now hunched forward like Rodin's Thinker, peering up at P.J. through bushy eyebrows, his hand over his mouth as if suppressing a burp. Seeing P.J. look at him, he nodded and tipped his head back to Mom.

"Planning our family to be the right sort of family was something we took very seriously when we were younger," she said, "and now we're seeing the—uh, results of all that. Each of you is very special, and you all have a place here that no one else has, and it's that unity of difference that makes us such a special family. If it were any different, it wouldn't be the same." P.J. had to agree with that.

"I know what you mean, Mom. Our personalities and everything, the way we interact, they all balance out. If one of us were gone, we wouldn't be so balanced."

"We wouldn't be a unit," Dad said forcefully, and then settled down again.

P.J. went on cautiously, to show them that he was following: "Virgil is sort of the scholarly type with all his Greek poetry and stuff, and he'll grow up to be a real model citizen, and Nancy is kind of more rambunctious but in a healthy way, and we need both these kinds of people in our family. And you're real supportive and nurturing and Dad is, well, Dad. And the twins are like some kind of fountainhead, I guess, just pure energy. It's harder to tell with Stephanie and Junior, they're still so little, but I guess Junior being retarded and kind of ugly also balances things out because we're all pretty perfect, mentally and physically. And me . . . "

"Yes," Mom said. "You. P.J., uh, what we meant to tell you, is." She took a breath, looked away, then summoned up some strength and looked him in the eyes. "P.J., you're gay."

That's not true, he thought. Maybe I was happy a week ago, but it's been bleak since then. He couldn't just say that, though. They wouldn't understand. So he smiled as best he could.

"That's the way we arranged it," she said after an awkward minute. "Genetically, we did what we could. There was some use of infantile conditioning, sublims in your bassinet, just to make sure it would be expressed. But we were sure all along that we wanted you to be gay. Studies show it's best for a large family; it balances things out, smooths the edges, rounds the corners."

"What?" P.J. said. "I—you genetailored me to be happy? Well I hate to tell you, but I don't think it worked very well."

Awkwardness crackled through the air. Dad cleared his throat, tried on an ill-fitting smile, exchanged it for a solemn pucker. Mom sighed.

"You wouldn't know that use of the word, would you?" she said. "It's nothing you hear around here. What your father and I are trying to say is, you are homosexual, Peter. Attracted to your own sex in a sexual way."

Dad sat up suddenly, as if he couldn't take any more pussyfooting. "You're a queer, Peter. A fag. A fruit."

P. J.'s mouth worked incompletely: "I'm a . . . I'm a . . ."

"A homo, P.J., you got that?" Dad roared the word, then fell back in his chair, drained, pressing the heel of his hand to his brow. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to make this any harder on you."

"Oh, dear," said Mom. "Dear Peter. We hope you understand, and that you'll accept yourself for what you are."

"A mincing little queen," Dad mumbled, staring into a corner of the room.

"Your father's had a little trouble getting used to the idea," Mom said.

P.J. rose slowly from his chair, his face on fire, feeling worse than he would have if his hair had stood on end and exploded into wisps of smoke. He could find no words to express what he felt. He had stumbled—no, been pushed—into a yawning pit, and as far as he could tell it had no bottom.

"You can go back to that memo now," Dad said. "That's all we had to say."

P.J. felt the rush of tears, but he couldn't believe they were coming from his eyes. Not him, not him.

"Don't take it so hard," Dad said. "It's not like you're missing out on anything."

"Bill!" said Mom.

P.J. shook his head, his voice trapped in the swiftly closing vise of his throat: "How could you?" he shouted at them. "How could you have done this to me?"

"Jesus Christ," said Dad. "The doc said we had to."

P.J. flung himself out of the room, nearly fell down the stairs, and ran for the door. He was hardly outside when he remembered where he was, and what woke him was the first warning pung! of gunfire against the receding tungsten plates.

Across the street, in a second-story window, he saw Mr. Smith with a handheld rifle trained on him.

"Go on," P.J. shouted. "Put me out of my misery."

And with a final scream, imagining his body riddled with bullets that were less hot than his shame, he fell in a heap to the lawn.

The sprinklers when they went on were a cool balm.

From the

LEAF AND COBBLE ONLINE TV GUIDE

Screen 451, Monday, Daytime Programming:
10:00 AM

NETWORK LISTINGS:

02 General Education: Today the General takes viewers to the Jap/Arab border in Central Pennsylvania.

05 Cleaning Your Automat Kitchen

09 Whiling Away the Time: Using an electronic level to check doorjambs; what to do with those old kitchen drawers; pills to purge melancholy, and how to order them.

13 Doctor at Large: Gratuitous surgery—good for the neighborhood.

LOCAL LISTINGS:

01 PIEducation

27 The Ricky Stephenson Show: "Impressions of My Parents in the Shower."

58 Danny and Lucille: "Christmas in July."

96 Billy Drew's Video Extravaganza: "The Longest Glitch."

Screen 477, Monday, Evening Programming:
8:00 PM

NETWORK LISTINGS:

02 Family Network Satellite News (Local Events) **05 Family Network Satellite News** (National, Global) **09 Will You Be My Neighbor?**

13 Special: "Hoeing Your Own Row."

LOCAL LISTINGS:

46 The Van Patten Family Hour: "Goodbye Crewel World"—Mrs. V.P. gives up knitting after Muffin eats her eighth half-finished sweater; Mr. V.P. gets off work early and disturbs the baby; finishing touches on the davenport.

83 The Johnson Family Hour: "Kids Will Be Kids"—P.J. learns to deal with his own homoeroticism; Nancy June is restless; the twins break a window without setting off the alarm; Wolfie eats the hard-copy notes for Virgil's thesis on Pindar.

97 The Smith Family Hour: "Sneaking Around"—Jock covers the house lenses with duct tape; Arnold resumes an old alliance; Doris teaches the children to whisper "Guys and Dolls."

115 The Doe Chronicles: As the first step in tracking down his namesake, John calls the Post Office.

Virgil proceeded on hands and knees down the carpeted upstairs hallway, having scoured every inch of his own room for the scraps of shredded yellow foolscap that Wolfie had scattered everywhere. Dad laughed at him from the top of the stairs.

"That'll teach you to use that old-fashioned pulp, Virg. You're the only thing standing between America and the paperless future."

"Yeah, Dad," Virgil said, dropping to his belly at the entrance to his parents' bedroom. From this rather rare perspective he could see little flecks of the yellow stuff under the bed and piled in corners. He groaned and started forward, his bony elbows aching.

"You coming down to watch the show?" Dad said.

"No, Dad."

"Why not? You edited this one, didn't you?"

"I want to rescue what I can of my notes before the vac-system turns on at nine. And I didn't have time to edit the show; it's my editing algorithm, that's all."

"Oh, one of those," Dad said, deprecatingly. "Colored filters and slow motion shots of your mom opening insta-serves."

Virgil's hand closed on a triangular wad of three pages stuck together; there were actually a few complete sentences visible.

"I think I outgrew trick photography some time ago, Dad."

"Well, no matter. Good luck with your thesis."

He heard Dad thudding downstairs like a bag full of rocks. As far as he could tell, the rest of the notes in this room were a total loss; the vacuum could have them. He backed out, got up on his knees, and pushed on the door to P.J.'s room. There was a chance Wolfie had gotten in—

"Hey!" P.J. shouted. The door flew back at Virgil, striking him with a dull sound in the temple and knocking his glasses awry. He sank back, rubbing his skull.

"Watch who you slam that on," he moaned. "Hey, what are you doing?"

P.J. backed up against the bed that took up most of his cubicle. He had just thrown a blanket over a pile of strange odds and ends, but among the items that poked out in places were tennis shoes, the cuff of a jacket sleeve, a jackknife. He tried to block it from Virgil's view.

"What are you doing, you mean?" P.J. said. "Don't you ever knock?"

"Sorry, I thought you'd be downstairs watching TV, so why bother? I'm looking for my notes."

P.J. looked scared, pale, worse than he had for the last few days.
He nodded toward the corner behind the door. "Those them?"

In the corner was a swept-up pile of yellow scraps, the choicest fragments he had found yet. He grabbed them, rising, and stuffed them in his pocket. His head was starting to throb, and it looked like his glasses were bent out of shape: P.J.'s head was farther off than his feet.

"So, uh, P.J., what's going on?"

"Nothing," P.J. said belligerently. "Just get out of my room."

Virgil went toward the pile on the bed, and met full resistance from his brother. He avoided the first strike of P.J.'s arms, but a body block to his gut sent him sprawling back into the wall. This time he banged the back of his head.

"Jesus, P.J., what's your problem?"

As his vision cleared he saw his brother facing him, hands clenched, scowling, red-faced. "It's none of your business, Virgil."

"Ow." Virgil touched the tender spot on the back of his head, checked his fingers for blood. "What do you think I'm going to do? Go down and tell Dad you're cleaning your room? He'd probably throw a party."

"I'm not cleaning my room," P.J. snapped.

"Oh, then what? Come on, P.J., or maybe I will tell Dad."

"You better not." P.J. grabbed his arm and twisted it behind his back; Virgil knew P.J. could easily dislocate his shoulder.

"Let go," he said. "God damn, Peej. I'm your brother. If you can't trust me, who can you trust?"

"No one, apparently."

"I know what you're doing."

"Oh, you figured it out finally? Anyone else would have had it the minute they walked through that door."

P.J. let go of him and dropped down onto the bed; with a flourish, he pulled off the blanket, revealing a wad of clothes and spare possessions and a backpack he used for trips to the beach.

"You're running away?" Virgil said.

"You got it. You gonna go tell Dad?"

Virgil shrugged. "I guess not. I just can't believe you would want to."

"Believe it." He bunched up the blanket and stuffed a pair of socks into the pack. "I can't stay here anymore. I've had it with Dad and his typing tests. I can't believe touch-typing is going to make a difference when I put on the motor-stim verbalizers. But . . . it's more than that. I don't want that whole world anymore." He raised his arms. "This little world. Walls. It sucks."

"So how long can you stay on the beach? Are you even taking a sleeping bag?"

P.J. narrowed his eyes, his smile became ironic. "You really don't understand, do you? You're just like all the rest of them. I'm not going to the beach, Virgil. I'm going east. Outside. Over the wall. I'm breaking out of the neighborhood."

Virgil, leaning against the wall, let himself slide to the floor. "You're kidding, Peej." He was aghast. "You've really got to be kidding."

"You can't imagine anything outside your books, that's your problem." P.J. turned away, rolled up a pair of jeans, stuffed them in the sack. "Kurt Foster got assigned to perimeter security on his eighteenth birthday. I already talked it over with him. If I can get over the wall, he'll look the other way. He says the guards don't pay much attention anyway. There's nothing to see outside,

there's never been a threat. The people out there don't care about us.

"You're crazy!"

"Shh!"

"You're crazy," Virgil whispered. "The defense system is designed to track and kill anything that moves outside that wall; there's a noman's land there, and you'd have to go through it."

"If Nancy June can sneak out of the house at night without Dad knowing she's meeting Arnold, I can get out of the neighborhood. Open sesame. The wall is there to keep people out. The walls that keep people in are all in here." He tapped his skull. "Mind games, that's what hooks the suckers like you, Virgil. Promises. If you work hard without complaining, you get to be like Dad. An asshole."

"You're too hard on him," Virgil said. "Besides, we both know this stuff about walls isn't the real problem at all. It's yourself you're afraid to face, so now you're running away. It's an overreaction, P.J., like your screaming jag the other day. It's hormones." P.J.'s face turned white, lined in red. "And, my . . . my sex, is that all hormones too?"

"See, you're evading what really bothers you."

"I am not. I can't live here anymore, not with them." He pointed toward the family room downstairs.

"They're your parents."

P.J. shook his head. "I can never love them after what they did to me."

"They thought it was for the best."

"They did it without even asking."

Virgil laughed. "How could they have asked?"

"Laugh all you want, Virgil. You're just as much a product of their genetic specs as I am. And maybe there's some kind of time bomb in you, too, something you'll only find out about when you're good and unready for it. Because that's what it feels like, brother. I've got a time bomb inside me now, ticking away. All of a sudden I feel like I don't know anything, can't trust my own perceptions. I'm just waiting until . . . like, what if Kurt brushes against me or something and I find myself wanting to . . . to . . ."

"Peter." Virgil stood up and came toward him.

"How could they do this to me? To me?"

P.J. lowered his head, put his hands over his eyes, and began to sob. Virgil sank down next to him, put an arm around his shoulders. "What does it matter?" he said softly. "What does it change, Peter John?"

"Everything," his younger brother whispered. "Nothing is the same now, not for me; that's why I have to leave. Outside there's a real world, with none of this programming, none of these walls, none of these sexual booby-traps. That's where I'm going. I want to get lost in it and know I can never come back, because if I did the guns would shoot me down on the way in."

"I'm sure they wouldn't shoot without asking who you were,"

Virgil said, "in case you wanted to come back."

P.J. raised his wet, mottled face. "Then you won't stop me? You won't tell Dad?"

"It's your life, P.J. Do what you want with it."

P.J. gave him an awkward smile, and leaned forward to hug him. But as their bodies touched, Virgil felt his brother stiffen and gasp, then spring away from him. His eyes were wide with inexpressible emotion.

"No," he said. "Look at what I'm doing. My own brother . . . I'm coming on to my own brother."

"Oh, don't be absurd," Virgil said, rising. "I've got to keep looking for my notes. You know, Peej, you'll probably feel better when you're a bit further out of adolescence. Maybe you should hang out for another couple of weeks."

P.J. shook his head, determined. "I'm leaving tomorrow night," he said. "And no one is talking me out of it."

"I wouldn't dream of it. Goodnight."

Out in the hall again, Virgil went back onto his knees. He started to think about what had just passed, but a low sucking sound startled him. It couldn't be nine yet. A few yellow curlicues tumbled between his hands, and the heap of large fragments he'd collected vanished under the wainscoting. A low-lying storm of foolscap and dog hair rustled through the rooms.

"Help," he shouted. Down the hall, he heard the twins laughing.

***

The widewall TV in the family room flickered like Christmas tree lights on the upturned faces of the Johnson family, minus Virgil and
P.J. The twins giggled over their glasses of grape juice.

In the typically Virgilesque montage sequence, family faces whirled in a kaleidoscope of multicolored emotion, giving way to a silhouette of Dad at his PIJob; in the center of his head, Mom swayed against a starry blue background, a child's toy held in her hand like a microphone, singing the theme from the PIVacations commercial: "Get away, on the wings of imagination. Get away, on a
programmed Plug-In Vacation ..."

On the living room couch, Mom smiled over at Dad and squeezed his thigh.

"Hey, ow, you're pinching a nerve. I've got sciatica, remember?"

She leaned closer. "It would be nice to take a vacation, hon."

He shrugged, chewing a nail. "I've been thinking about picking up one of those new packs. Yosemite. I haven't seen it since I was a kid: it'd probably look nicer on PI, too. Not so much garbage, no mosquitoes."

"Sh!" said Nancy June.

Nancy herself appeared on the screen; there were variously angled shots of her progress down the upstairs corridor. She seemed to be walking on tiptoe past her parents' room. A digital clock in the corner of the screen showed the time as 6:54 A.M.

"Up kinda early," Dad said. The door to his room was ajar, and a shot from the hall showed him asleep on his back, elbow over his eyes, the hairs of his armpit stirring with each exhalation. The lens performed a slow, inspired zoom. This stuff had Virgil written all over it.

Risky spy music played background to Nancy's appearance in the living room. Suddenly there was a sting of horns and Wolfie appeared, scampering up to her, wagging his tail, opening his mouth to bark. Nancy clamped her hands around his muzzle and dragged him with her into the kitchen.

"Oh, honey," Mom said, "you'll hurt Wolfie like that."

Nancy—the real-time Nancy in the family room—looked uncomfortable. "Virgil," she murmured.

The onscreen Nancy went straight to the wallphone and punched out a code that appeared at the bottom of the picture. The number looked familiar but Dad couldn't figure out where he'd seen it.

Arnold Smith appeared on the phone screen. "Hi, Nan."

"Shh! Arnold, you'll wake everybody up."

"Turn down your volume, dummy."

"Oh, God," Nancy said in the family room. "Oh, God, I can't do anything around here."

"I miss you, Arnold."

"I miss you, too, Nancy June. Are you ever going to get to come over without sneaking?"

"Well, I called—"

"This isn't real!" Nancy shouted, standing up in front of her parents. "The computer made this up out of its memory!"

"Sure, honey," Dad said, listening through her interruption.

"I called to say I could maybe meet you at the beach tonight."

"Great," Arnold said. "What time?"

"Ahem!" Nancy June shouted. "Everybody, Virgil made this up to get me in trouble!"

"Eleven?"

"Please sit down, Nancy," Mom said.

"Can you get out of your house that late without anyone knowing?" Arnold asked.

"Aiieee!" Nancy screamed. "Help-help-help! L.B.J. bit me in the leg, Mommy! It's bleeding, it's gushing blood! Look, Dad, please go get me a tourniquet!"

"Sure, with that little gadget you made the alarms don't go off at all."

Dad rose up from the couch. "That's enough out of you, young lady. There aren't going to be any midnight trysts with Arnold
Smith."

"Daddy . . ." She looked desperate. "I haven't seen him in weeks."

He turned off the TV, and the twins started yelling. The juice stains on L.B.J's mouth did look a little like blood. "Now look here, Nancy June," he said, "I'm not going to make you sneak around my house, or out of it. I'm not that kind of father." Looking chastened, hands behind her back, she shook her head. "What I propose is that you invite Arnold over here straight off. Ask him if he wants to come watch TV with us." "Really?" she said.

"But there's one condition. I want to see this little device you're talking about."

"Oh, that," she said. "Sure, I'll get it."

She ran away upstairs, and Dad dropped down next to his wife, almost upsetting Junior from the end of the couch. "If that Arnold can get through my security system with another of his brain teasers, I'd hate to think what would happen if his invention fell into the wrong hands. His father's, say."

Nancy June returned with a remodeled kid's gun. Instead of making bright electric sparks when he pulled the trigger, it gave off a low hum. Dad was startled to hear the unmistakable sound of the tungsten-alloy lamellas opening at the front and back of the house.

"I'll be damned," he said. "Were the twins playing with this when they pried the windows open?"

Lyndon Baines and Lady Bird hid their faces.

"All right." He stood up. "Go call your friend and ask him to come over. I want that kid on my side."

"He likes you, Daddy."

"I'm relieved to hear it. Go on, you know the number."

Ten minutes later, Nancy went to answer the front door and returned with red-headed, acne-beleaguered Arnold Smith. Arnold's skinny arms were wrapped around a shiny polyboard box, out of which a coil of wires protruded.

"Uh . . . hi, Mr. Johnson, Mrs. Johnson," he said, out of breath, and dropped the box with a crash on the floor, startling Junior.

"I'll be right back," Mom said, hurrying away with the baby.

"I told my folks I was going over to Mike Brown's house to make science kits." Arnold looked up at Dad, such a serious teenager that Dad felt absolutely frivolous by comparison. "But Nancy June said you were watching TV, so I brought one of my things along."

"Something you made?" Dad said, hunkering down by the box.

"Yup. It's a ground-based satellite-pirate, with evasion, penetration, and retrieval capabilities."

"What does it do?"

Nancy stood next to them. "Arnold, don't talk about this stuff, let's watch TV."

"This makes TV even better," he said. "I'm sure you know this, Mr. Johnson, but Nancy might not. All our television channels in this neighborhood are restricted, Nan; we only get them through approved satellites—watchdogs. So in Laurel Woods and Cobblestone Hill together we get four national network channels; that's all we're allowed. Four out of hundreds that we could be watching. Plus there are local stations all over the place, aside from just the family channels we get to see. I mean, there are literally billions of channels worldwide, and when they're bouncing around overhead in the satellite nets, it's easy to receive them. But not with those watchdogs, boy."

"So what you've got here, I imagine, is a dog catcher."

"Sort of. It brings in the restricted stations. You wanna see?" Mom came back with Junior and sat down again to watch the blank screen.

"I'm not so sure I want to see these things, Arnold, and especially not with my kids around."

"I've seen 'em," Arnold said. "It didn't hurt me."

"I have a reputation to protect," Dad reasoned. "Not to mention the ethical welfare of my family and the moral agreement I've made with the community as a whole. Hell, boy, I was on the committee that voted for the restrictions in the first place. It doesn't seem quite right to watch the stuff just because we can. I could kill Connie right now, smother her with a sofa cushion, but I don't do it, and that's because I value my integrity. I decided years ago, for my family and myself, that I didn't need to subject myself to the disturbing images of the world beyond the neighborhood's walls—a world you've never seen, son—"

"But I have seen it," Arnold said. "That's all I watch. There're adventure shows, and business stuff I don't understand, most of it in other languages, and channels that are nothing but colors and shapes and music, and people preaching, and courtrooms, and channels that just play laughter or screaming, and war shows and naked sex channels and all this great stuff."

"It's a bit like going back on my word," Dad said. "I'll feel a little funny, that's all. Give me a minute to get used to the idea."

It was easily done, somewhat to his surprise. Blue light glowed out of the polyboard box, the TV image flipped, and Arnold sat down next to Nancy, twirling the dials on what looked like an old electric blanket control.

"A few channels I've programmed in," he said. "The rest is hunt and peck."

A surreal image of a woman's breast swelled out of the screen, a smile stretched across the nipple, but it went by too fast for Dad. He decided not to call it back until the kids had gone to bed.

"You're welcome to stay over if you can convince your parents you're somewhere else, Arnold."

"You can sleep with me," Nancy said. "Let's go right now—"

"Wait," Arnold said, dragging back as she pulled on his arm. "See that? They're all over the air, seems like half the national channels."

Dad looked up. On the screen was a vast animated cross, tilting toward him, soaring out of a supernal blue sky like his fondly remembered missile. Dad clenched the arm of the sofa and sat up straighter: there was something unholy about the sheer size of the thing, not to mention its sharpened tips. Stretched out upon it was a withered, blackened thing with burning red eyes, barely recognizable as human. It enlarged steadily, the eyes burning brighter, the mouth opening wider, showing sharpened steel-bright teeth. The world rose into the frame, swelling, and North America rolled over the globe like a dog offering its belly to the plunging crucifix.

Dad's teeth ground tighter in his head, squeaking. He stared at the hot red eyes and jagged teeth, the figure's black mouth gaping in starvation, as if it could eat everything there was and still continue to shrivel.

The stake was about to pierce the earth, but before it did the cross-rider's black mouth yawned to fill the screen with red-flecked blackness and a voice of thunder commanded, "EAT ME!"

The twins, whimpering earlier, now screamed with all their hearts.

Into the peaceful darkness of the screen, a bald head rose like a sallow moon, and a pair of close-set watery blue eyes blinked out at them.

"Brethren—" said the soft voice.

Arnold switched the channel.

"There's a lot of that," he said.

No one said anything for a moment. Stephanie had burrowed into the sofa. Dad got up, aware that he was shaking, and took the control box away from Arnold.

"That's exactly the kind of shit I was talking about," he said. "That's exactly why I voted for restricted channels and brought my family up in a neighborhood like this."

"They call themselves the Christian Soldiers," Arnold said, in a much diminished voice. "I dunno. Their cartoons are pretty good."

"Shit," Dad said. "Why don't you kids go fuck around?"

"Gee," said Arnold. "All right."

***

Nancy June and Arnold sat outside on the back porch, underneath a sky of mist and stars, their arms around each other.

"This is so romantic," Nancy said.

"I know," said Arnold. "Your dad's pretty neat."

"You think so? Everybody else thinks he is an asshole."

"Everybody who? Just 'cause my dad doesn't like him?"

"I think they're madder about the golf course than about what he did to your dad."

"I don't know," Arnold said. "I wish he hadn't crossed my pop. My dad is crazy. I mean really crazy, Nan. You'd have to put up with that if he was your father-in-law. He has a certificate. I saw it in his sock drawer once, and it says he's crazy. Some doctor signed it. Maybe it was a joke thing, like you'd put on the wall of your office with your diplomas and stuff . . . but it didn't look that way at all. I think he's really crazy."

But Nancy hardly heard most of what he said. "Father-in-law," she whispered. "Do you really mean it, Arnold?"

"Well, someday. I'm only thirteen, and you're even younger, but next year, you know, I'll be seventeen. We have to think about the future."

"Arnold." She put her arms all the way around him, loving the smell of his acne cream. His hair was only a little greasy tonight, so she ran her hands through it. "I love you."

"Me, too," he said. "You know, I'm getting another speed treatment tomorrow. I'll be . . . accelerating again, getting a lot older fast. I hope you won't mind."

"Why should I? I'm getting mine soon, and besides, I'm more mature than you."

"I'll be different," he said. "But please, still love me, all right?" "Of course I will. Oh, Arnold, we'll have a family and everything. I'll stay home and clean the house and you'll go on to your job, and the rest of the time we'll be together."

Lying back in his arms, she thought of the years ahead of her, and smiled. It felt like the way she thought her mother smiled. Someday she would be like her mother, so happy, so wise, with a husband and children and no cares in the world.

"Let's go to bed," Arnold said.

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Connie was rolled gently from bed at 7:30 A.M. and deposited in a warm bath, where she finally awoke, thankful for automats that could rescue her from dreams. But as she lay in the foaming jets, bobbing gently, her pores were permeated by tingling stimulants, and images from her nightmares returned with terrible clarity. Her dreams were usually sluggish, confused things, like a jumble of television channels, and they fled at awakening to lose their way among other useless thoughts. But this morning the memories had a strange vitality, and she could not seem to awaken; the invigorants merely sent her into them with greater lucidity.

She had dreamed of watching television with Bill, but suddenly he was replaced by a full-grown Junior. The big baby had no interest in the sex station that his father had selected; fumbling at the remote control, he had switched channels until he found a repeat of that horrible cartoon: the plunging crucifix, the withered rootlike man, the poor world . . .

Without knowing why, she had snatched the remote away from Junior, but he leapt upon her, heavy and drooling, a giant in diapers. He forced her to watch the screen, whereon appeared the bald man with weak eyes and such a soft voice:

"Brethren and sisters," he said, addressing her in particular, pinned as she was by her enormous son and unable to look away.

"Have you opened your eyes to the truth? Watch these previews."

Connie saw a farmstead, an orchard, dewy fields; heard a brass gong ringing, as musical in its way as the sound of the creek running through autumn-bright aspens. Trees, she thought. Why, it looks like my home.

But that was a silly thought. She heard the big baby giggle. It couldn't be her home; it looked nothing at all like Cobblestone Hill.

There was an old white farmhouse with porches running about both stories, and ferns all around, and a brown cat slipping out the side door followed by puffs of steam and the smell of baking bread.

She heard a woman singing, and it was a beautiful, familiar song.

Why, that's my mother. I haven't thought of her in years.

She found herself floating out from under Junior, into the screen, right over the side porch past the heaps of chopped firewood, into a hall where a pot-belly stove sat in the midst of a fairy-ring of wet shoes and boots. As she warmed her hands, feeling her way into this dreaming body which seemed slight and quick as a girl's, she heard the singing change inexplicably, as though the singer were coughing up something bad; and there was also some scuffling.

She drifted to the doorway and looked into the kitchen. A kettle fumed, about to whistle. Sausage patties spat and hissed in the castiron frying pan on the stove. Her mother bent over behind the counter, but when she straightened, it wasn't her mother at all.

It was the root-thing, gnarled and slithy.

She screamed and it turned with its cross dripping red and it held out its arms to welcome her.

She flew in terror over the fields, to the little outbuilding with the brass gong hanging from its eaves. There should have been sounds of chanting, low and sonorous, and the smell of incense, but there were none of these things. Inside the temple, there should have been a dozen of her parents' friends wrapped in their heavy robes, eyes closed, heads bowed, chanting before the smoking altar with its big Buddha seated like all of them. Her father should have been there.

But this morning the grown-ups lay all over the place, and she did not see her father. She was glad that the candles had been snuffed; she could see too much as it was.

Then a little old balding man with very bright blue eyes stood up in the middle of the room, lit by his own spotlight. He came toward her with a crucifix in one hand and a hammer in the other, saying, "How sad, a child. What a shame, to have lost your youth —given but once—in an evil place like this. If you were very young, we might still welcome you into the fold. But . . . don't lose hope, child.

There is always the promise of limbo."

And he came at her, forcing her out of the television screen, raising the cross above her as she lay on the couch in the den, trapped by her own huge son.

As the hammer fell, the whole dream cut away to bright block letters:

TUNE IN

SUNDAY MORNING

CHANNEL 666

BE THERE OR BE DAMNED

Those were only the previews.

When they were over, they started again, and after that again, each time more real, until upon awakening, here in the cooling tub, there was no way she could forget it. The memory was like a message written to herself.

She had lived it, hadn't she? Perhaps not the root-thing, but certainly the murders. Perhaps not the hammered crucifix, but something similar. All that had been before Cobblestone Hill, before meeting Bill at college and coming away with him, mortgaging her given name for a dream of safety. She had been Nirvana once, her parents Sam and Sara, gentle Buddhists.

The water sucked out of the tub, leaving her drying in a warm stream of air, wide awake but a bit dazed.

It was scary that she never thought of the past, that she accepted all this—her house, Cobblestone Hill—as if it were all that existed or ever had been.

Could she ever remember what had come before? Trying to think of the old days brought on a headache; fortunately, the medicine cabinet was near. She sat on the edge of the tub, twiddling a green caplet between her fingers, thinking.

First comes love, then comes marriage . . .

The neighborhood had been the plan of Dr. Ralph Edison, inspired by corporate philosophy. Work together, play together, live together—the company picnic taken to its limits and beyond. It had sounded so good in those years of fragmentation, when Connie and Bill had felt as if they were the last reasonable people in a mob of fanatics. It was a chance to take back the American dream—the dream that had become lost somehow among the splinters and the fringes, trampled by terrorists, syndicates, and social reform. The world at that time was not the sort of place where one wished to raise a family. But behind the walls of the neighborhood, there was peace and plenty, low-cost housing, the best in educational software, neighborhood health care: benefits, benefits, benefits. They had found a place among people like themselves, and had become so firmly settled there that eventually the rest of the world began to recede. There was little news of events beyond the wall, although Neighborhood Security constantly reassured them that they were safe from "danger." What danger?

There were so many things she didn't know.

"Bill?" she said, stepping to the bedroom door in her bathrobe. He was sitting up in bed, a slippery newssheet before his face.

"Bill, it's funny, but I can't remember, maybe you can. Did my parents come to our wedding?" Or was that dream only a dream, she thought.

"You were in school on an orphan-grant, weren't you? You don't have parents."

"I was born before time-baking, Bill." But that answered her question. "What was my maiden name?"

"Johnson," he said.

"Are you sure?"

"Sure I'm sure. Johnson. We were made for each other."

Did I remake myself for you? she wondered. Did Nirvana do that?

She watched him, the news rising and falling slowly on his belly, his eyes still crusted with sleep, aging—she had to admit it—badly. For you?

As she turned toward the hall, he said, "Hey, hon, are you sure you wouldn't like to try one of these renovated vaginas? Dr. Edison is having an introductory sale. No problem if you don't, of course." She swallowed, numb.

"No," she said after a moment. "No, I really don't think so, Bill.

No."

"Okay." She heard him sigh. "Up to you."

She moved on into the hall, hearing the children moving in their rooms. She opened the cupboard where Wm. D. Jr. slept and took a glance in. The baby opened his eyes at the touch of light, made a soft noise, tried to sit up. Despite herself, the memory of the dream came after her: she saw him full-grown and still in her care, still needing to be spoon-fed, still making those soft bubbling noises.

And Dr. Edison's explanation before his conception came back to her: "You'll need something to do in your twilight years, Connie, some strong link to the fruitful years of motherhood. I think you'll agree, when you reach that age, that a son who stays at home is a thing to be treasured. A good investment." She closed the cupboard and stood with her back against it, trembling.

Dad shook his head, as if reproaching his insta-serve pancakes, then looked up at Connie. "I'm sorry, hon, I have to work today." "Saturday?" she said.

"I thought we were going golfing," Virgil said.

"Well, I'm sorry, this project just won't wait."

"Bill, that's a solid month of Saturdays you've had to work, and the Fuel Committee meeting will waste your day tomorrow." "I guess I should see Elaine anyway," said Virgil.

"Mom, I'm staying at Mike Swanson's tonight, okay?"

"Just a minute, P.J. Bill, we had plans for this afternoon, don't you remember?"

"I said I'm sorry, hon, but I can't get around it. It's drudgery, but I'm under pressure to finish as soon as I can. Now five other guys are going to plug-in to sweat on this damn thing. What are they going to think if I decide to go golfing or swimming while they work overtime?"

"Mrs. Swanson said it was okay, Mom."

Dad pointed his fork at his oldest son. "Anyway, Virgil, you should be spending more time with that lady of yours. You've got to get used to her. The wedding is when . . . less than a month?"

Virgil looked uncomfortable, remote from his own body. "It's not like we have to spend all our time together."

"You don't spend any time together since you got engaged."

Virgil blushed. "It's different now."

"Bill, now look, what time are you going to be off? Leave Virgil alone a minute and answer me."

"I did answer you. I said I don't know. You think I'm going to hang around there any longer than I have to? Or any of us? It's
Saturday for the other guys, too."

"Mrs. Johnson, could I have more pancakes?" Arnold asked.

"I'll get them," Nancy said. "You stay right where you are."

Dad watched his wife glowering at her placemat. He knew it was useless to argue. He looked at the clock.

"I'm sorry," he said, and got up, leaving the table to sort itself out. "I'll get back when I can."

Dad reminded himself that his lies were well justified: Doctor's orders. The era had long since passed when plugging-in was an economic necessity; there were only "pleasure" programs now. Doc Edison insisted, however, that Dad and the other men of the neighborhood plug-in regularly: the daily work pattern must not be altered if the nuclear family were to remain stable. "Take away a man's role as breadwinner and you take his authority," Doc had said once, and on that point Dad had to agree.

Upstairs, in his study, it was peaceful, the sun warm on his desk. He flipped the switch on his console, called up the job entry, and pulled on his working suit. With his eyes covered, his hands in the pads, he walked down a long featureless corridor lined with doors. The first one he came to had his name on it, but it was only a decoy door, programmed to detain anyone who came looking for him without authorization. He went past it to another labeled **CENTRAL FILES**.

Inside, there were several rows of metal shelves, and past them a door labeled Men. He went through that, took a step, fell.

Howling his laughter, he plunged down the slick red slide into a frenetic jungle of color, light, and sound. His body changed as he accelerated. Balls of lightning showed a much younger William D.
Johnson, his stomach firm and lightly haired, his naked legs slim and fluent with muscle. Suddenly the slide ended in the midst of an electric blue vapor, and he flew into space, flapping powerful wings.

"Hey, Bill."

He looked across the color-cracked abyss and saw his four coworkers gliding toward him, all of them naked youths with angel wings.

"You're late," yelled Marv Coolidge, a smooth-faced kid with curly blond hair.

"Give me a break," Bill said. "You gonna dock me five minutes' overtime? This is volunteer work."

Marv circled around him playfully, but there was an uneasy look in his young features. "I hear the Lodge Council is planning an inquisition, Bill. To settle accounts between you and Jock."

"Do you believe everything you hear, Marv?" Dad slapped him above one wing. "What're you trying to do, spoil my afternoon?"

"Well, you know I'll always vouch for you."

"Marvin, sometimes you surprise me. You're taking it too seriously."

Coolidge shrugged and broke into a high-pitched laugh. "If you say so."

"Hurry up," shouted Dave Hiram. "Wait'll you see this new routine. It's straight down, Bill."

They folded their wings and dropped like arrows, five angels centering on a target of high crystalline spires whose tips flashed up from the emptiness below. Their meteoric flight ended on a narrow balcony, outside an arched doorway. Inside were the sounds of laughter, music, the smell of intoxicating smoke.

Marv tapped Bill on the back, between his wings. "After you, pal."

Bill went in and was stunned at first by the seemingly impossible display of raw sensations that met him: kinesthesia—his body relaxed into it, dissolving, fusing with the light and the taste of liquor and the smooth touch of sweat-slickened skin. There he was, a mote, an angel—alone, but only for an instant.

Then the women appeared: five, nine, a dozen, twenty, more and more, flitting through the high-domed chamber, lascivious sprites, all wanting him. With a laugh he sprang into their midst, and the nuptial flights continued through the long Saturday afternoon.

***

It was a stunning day, the first that actually felt like summer, and Virgil could see that the green of the grass on the hills beyond the wall was well on its way to being replaced by the straw color more typical of the season. Only in the neighborhood would all the grass stay green, for only there was all the grass confined in regularly watered lawns. The wind off the sea kept the sun's heat from reaching them, but its light was unobstructed.

"What is it, Virgil?" said Elaine Wesson. "You seem distracted."

"Hm?"

He looked away from the wall that edged the eastern limit of the golf course and reminded himself that he was supposed to entertain his fiancée. But his smile, when he allowed it to be seen, felt artificial. The worst thing was that it had nothing to do with her. He couldn't stop thinking about P.J.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't sleep well last night; I keep drowsing."

"You need stronger prescriptions," she said. "As you get older, I mean."

"I guess you're right."

Elaine looked especially suggestive this afternoon. Her widebrimmed bonnet was wrapped to her head with a pale scarf, and with the accompanying traditional veil she resembled a beekeeper; the wind had flushed the cream from her cheeks, he thought, but it was hard to see her clearly. He rather regretted the engagement attire, meant to increase his suspense until the connubial unveiling. His memories of Elaine in her swimsuit, before his proposal, were almost painful. The many layers of her dress beat like flags, slowing their progress across the slopes from hole to hole, and the ballooning of her sleeves had made it impossible for her to wield a club; so instead of playing golf, they strolled arm in arm over the course.

The wind was strong enough to dissuade others from playing. There had used to be a windbreak afforded by tall pines and eucalyptus along the seacliff, but that was gone now, just as the lip of the cliff was gone. They stood rather close to the upright tail of the missile, half-buried in an oversized gopher hill of piled-up earth: the mound and its accompanying trench made up the new sixteenthhole trap. The missile awaited removal by his father, in which case, Virgil thought, it would wait a long time, until it became a sort of monument to his perverse ingenuity. After their initial uproar, most of the men in the country club had admitted that the new trap added something to the course.

At last they stopped at the gouged-away earth slide above the sea. Virgil gazed in fascination at the strata of jumbled yellow stones, like rows of crooked stained teeth jutting out from under the rough hem of the golf course. He felt a sudden vertigo and stepped backward, pulling Elaine with him. She shrieked, but it turned to a laugh as they ran downhill, out of the wind, toward the remaining trees.

They came to a stop, breathless, and Elaine swung toward him.

He was sure she would have kissed him, if not for the veil.

"Virgil," she said, "please, dear heart, what is it? You look so worried."

"It's . . . it's nothing," he said. "Nothing to do with you, Elaine." "But can't you confide in me? You should learn to trust me, Virgil. I am the partner of your heart. Shouldn't you share your heart's concerns?"

His jaw tightened and he felt vulnerable, unfairly matched, for her face was completely hidden and his was bare. Perhaps it was the marriage that disturbed him, more than P.J.'s secret. She seemed like a stranger now, no more the laughing girl on the beach.

"Virgil," she said, "what is it?"

"I. . . I . . ." He shook his head in agony, stumbling away from her. He heard her gasp, felt her hand tighten on his elbow, then she pulled him straight up, forced him to face her, and her words came out of the shadow of the veil, urgent and terse, but whispered: "Virgil," she said, "tell me . . . or I'll tear your face off."

***

P.J. huddled in the shadow of the wall, the night wind cold in his hair, his face wet with saltwater that blurred with the tears in his eyes. Footsteps passed overhead, but he was among shrubs, invisible. When the shape of the watchman had gone on, he stood and continued through the bushes until he came to a tower built into the wall, with windows in its heights and a door in its base. Kurt would be alone in there now. He pressed a button near the door, and after a pause it buzzed and swung open.

Above him, at the top of a spiral stair, his best friend looked down. He looked pale, as frightened as P.J.

P.J. said, with as much bravado as he could manage, "I'm ready if you are."

"You're really doing it, huh? I thought you'd back out."

P.J. shook his head. Kurt said, "Well, good luck," waved briefly, and tried to smile. He did not come down the stairs to say goodbye, not even to shake hands; he had seen the Johnson Family Hour last week and knew the reason behind P.J.'s flight.

"I won't be seeing you again, Kurt. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

Kurt twisted his lower lip, sucking it. "No more flag football?"

"Goodbye, Kurt."

P.J. turned around and went back out, and pressed the door shut behind him.

On the other side of the tower, a tarmac road began at a solid metal gate and went straight into the middle of Laurel Woods. Robot-driven delivery trucks sometimes came into the neighborhood this way, as well as Cartel people. The lights of the houses dimmed in clouds of mist, the juniper bushes bowed their farewells, bending low and whipping up again. Cobblestone Hill was visible above it, to the north, the humped back of a sleeping dragon. P.J. turned away from the secure homes and hurried through shadows until he came to the side of the gate.

From his pocket he took the toy gun that Arnold had rewired for the purpose of his midnight trysts with Nancy June. As he approached the gate, he pulled the trigger. The hum of the gun was joined by the groan of the gate, as with a jolt it began to open.

There was no need to wait: the gap was already wide enough for him to pass through. For a moment he was caught under bright lights, then the wind pushed him through the slit and the rumbling metal plate eclipsed the glare. The wind stopped, the air was still and dark, and he had nothing forcing him but himself.

Ahead there were three lamps to pass before he reached the darkness of the east, beyond the security perimeters. He hurried for the first, staying on the far side of the road, and had not gone far before the wind scooped down to the road again and got under his feet to help him along.

The first lamp flew past opposite him. He felt like a moth, a specimen held out in the darkness to any eyes that might have strayed toward the road. Kurt saw him, he was sure; but as for any other, he would soon know. He waited for shouts or, far worse than that, the silent lancing of a laser into his heart; but that was stupid, they would not fire on someone leaving the compound— only follow. Better death than that. If they chased him, he would run into noman's land, into the total dark, off the road where the automatic sentries would shoot him without inquisition.

The second lamp was behind him.

His lungs ached, the knapsack banged his ribs. He stumbled, almost fell into the splash of light beneath the third lamp, but then caught himself and came up laughing, nothing but night ahead of him now. Only Virgil and Kurt knew that he was gone. No one knew where he was going. With a kind of delight, he realized that no one included himself.

FROM VIRGIL LAMARCK JOHNSON'S PINDAR

> ". . . ravages of prehistory, the savage bite of a caveman's quill pen, from whose tatters arise the tradewind institutions of early classical man, among whom . . . nearly incomprehensible to the modern sensibility, given his reliance on an antiquated metric scale, the... Odes themselves take on a fabulous light that is half their own inner luminescence, half the . . . sail on a fragmented sea of Homericana . . . comic-opera melodrama, rare forms of driftwood, kraters of olive oil once carefully preserved, now clogging the depths of the already slimy . . . filter of Roman insensibility to the archaic themes of. . . fiscal responsibility for the heroic lads who braved . . . priapic dances . . . drunken heaving of the wine-dark . . . voice of . . . Pindar would perhaps remember with distress the . . . trophies of a noble, more intelligent, masculine yet sensitive . . . horse race, in a style rendered lucid by comparison to . . . more evocative computer translation still fascinated . . . too many . . . city-states . . . agon beyond shame or guilt cultures. . . the randy poet. . .
>
> kept from the windows of the courtesans, singing his. . . even so . . . ng . . ."

Nancy still had a lingering urge to sneak to the back door when Arnold whistled from the side of the house, but there was no need for secrecy around here now. It was only from Arnold's father that they needed to hide their affair, and as long as Arnold came around the back they were safe.

She walked straight through the kitchen where her mother was swabbing the breakfast table, through the family room where
Stephanie was trying to get off her leash, and opened the back door.

At first she didn't recognize him.

"What's the matter with you?" he said, in a voice that had an unaccustomed gruffness. He shouldered past her into the family room and pointed at his satellite-pirate on the floor below the TV screen. "I want that back."

"Arnold?"

He looked a size too big for his clothes, which he probably was. His hair was oilier and lay flat against his scalp, and his acne was inflamed. She also saw, with something of a start, that his jaws were covered with pale wisps of coarse-looking fur. His teeth looked crooked.

"Don't stare," he said. "I know what I look like."

"But . . . I'm sorry, I won't stare. You can laugh at me when I get my injection, all right?"

"There's nothing to laugh about," he said, with a sullen glare at Stephanie. "Leashed," he said angrily. "It's just another of the restraints slapped on all of us. And I've about had it with—" He broke off suddenly, hearing Mrs. Johnson approaching. "Quick, outside." He grabbed her elbow and pulled her with him through the back door, and around the corner of the house. "Arnold, what's happening?"

He gazed up at the sky, raising his chin to the wind. "I'm not sure
I can explain all of it."

"You're different now," she said. "That's all."

"No!" There were depths of anger in everything he said. "I'm not different—I'm more myself than ever before. I can see things more clearly now; I can see the pressures I've struggled with all these years, unconsciously. It's so obvious, so pitifully obvious, so hopeless . . . so futile."

She put a hand on his shoulder. "Arnold, don't talk like that." He shook his head. "No, I've found hope, Nancy. There is a way. All my life I've been repressed, you see. All of us have, here in this damned armed camp of a community, this—this monument to fossil values. From before I was conceived the ideals of my parents have been foisted upon me, cramping me. I rebelled the only way I knew how, for I was young and weak, and thought I was helpless. I rebelled through my intellect, creating the perfect wall to demonstrate the frailty of their walls, inventing tools to slip through their security nets and all their other restrictions. I dreamed without knowing it, Nancy, with never a memory of what it was I dreamed when I awoke."

Nancy listened in awe, awaiting every new word of this intense manifesto of puberty.

"But now I am awake, and I remember my dream all too clearly. It is a dream of freedom, and no longer will I merely dream it. I will live my dream. My mind has taken me this far . . . now my hands will finish the work."

She felt dizzy, as if he had led her to the brink of a new land named "Freedom," and said, "It's all ours."

"Arnold," she whispered. "What are you going to do?"

"I am going to build a bomb."

***

"No one in this community would have any use for a nuclear device," said William D, "Dad" Johnson to the assembly at the other side of the neighborhood. "Except, possibly, to heave at some threat outside our walls. I maintain, in any case, that the so-called dangerous plutonium pellets would be kept in a high-security compound. There is no more secure place in all of Cobblestone Hill and Laurel Woods than my garage."

"For all I care, you can keep it under your bed," Jock Smith said, standing up long enough to meet Dad's eyes. Smith smirked and welcomed the little wave of laughter that came from the sycophants in his Natural Gas Brigade, all of them wearing their little Blue Flame badges that said, "Ask Me About Gas!"

Dad jabbed a thumb downward. "History will laugh you off the page, Smith."

The men from Dad's side of the street chuckled their agreement.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, please," said the Cartel man on the podium at the front of the Whelk open-meeting hall. Mr. Ashenwriste was a tall, trim man, with distinguished silver panels in his black muttonchops, and deepset dark eyes. "Please keep in mind that there is no financial reality for your rivalry. The Cartel will serve any and all of your fuel needs,

no matter what type you require. If only one of you desires the garage-based nuclear unit at this time, then only one will be installed."

"That's right," yelled a Blue Flame. "There's only one crackpot."

Dad stood up to see who had spoken. "I'm not the only one considering the installation," he said, "even if I am the pioneer. Look at all these other fine men who share my ideas, all these courageous souls who'll join their names with mine on the first order for installation."

He turned and surveyed the faces of his comrades, and was annoyed by the eyes that wandered away from his, the mouths that refused to return his smile. Marv Coolidge, Dave Hiram, Gary Blankenship, his nearest neighbors. They couldn't all have been giving him lip service, he thought. Could they?

It didn't matter to him. He would go it alone if he must. But he wished someone could explain to him how, in trying to be a regular joe, he had ended up a maverick.

Charlie McCormick stood up in a rear corner of the room. He was the oldest man in the neighborhood now, after the Robertsons had been farmed back to Sunset Ranch at retirement, and his words were taken in silence by the other men:

"The simple fact is, divisiveness will push up prices for all of us, Bill. Whether we're going nuke or natural, the more of us in on the deal, the bigger the discounts. A dozen separate installations spread over time will cost about five fortunes more than a dozen installations done at once from a central distributor. Now stick that in your pipe and smoke it."

"I'm sorry to disagree with you just this once," Dad said, and he was. "But money is a yardstick for courage. Every great innovator has had to make an investment. What would have happened to Columbus if he decided to keep the money for his trip in a retirement account, where it would be safe until he was ready to use it?"

"It wasn't Columbus's money," Charlie snapped with the authority of history itself.

"Gentlemen," said Mr. Ashenwriste, and as always the men gave his words their full attention; he was the one who would be taking their money whatever they decided. "Let me remind you not to dwell on your hostilities, whatever their cause. You know me well by now. I have been your liaison for how many years? And have we not always reached mutually satisfying arrangements? Let me say that I have your interests at heart: I have feasted with your families, played softball in your Sunday picnics, golfed on your course, and walked your dogs." He put a finger to his lips, though no one had made a sound. "Do you not think I know you by now?"

The men looked at the floor and scuffled their feet as if ashamed for having forgotten their old friend the Cartel in the heat of their personal grudges. Finally someone asked, "Well, Mr. Ashenwriste, what would you suggest?"

"I say let Mr. Johnson install his nuclear unit. Let it be a trial run. He has a daughter on the way, genetically fitted for the explicit purpose of meeting the family-oriented nuclear future head-on: he has already prepared himself for the nuke's arrival, welcomed it into his home."

Dad inclined his head. "Well, I'm not looking to hog the limelight. These other gentlemen—" He blushed, aware that Ashenwriste's diction was phonifying his own. "—also want to sign up."

He looked at the "gentlemen" in question, and again they seemed rather interested in the door, the clock, the high dark corners of the building.

"Well, don't you?"

Marv smiled as if he were about to do him a big favor. "Well, it could run into some money, Bill. And while that's all very well, I may not be able to lay down much until there's a bigger customer base and some kind of discount. It makes sense to do it as a neighborhood thing."

"A neighborhood thing?" Bill said. "What are you, cattle? Where's your goddamned independence, Marv?"

Marv didn't answer. Dad decided not to play angel games with him for a while.

Dad looked up and saw Smith gloating.

"You're going to regret it, Jock, when you're squashed in the skid marks of history." He paused and had to think about what he'd said: he'd meant history would be taking off fast, but maybe it sounded like he'd meant it would be coming to an emergency halt.

"History, shmistory," Jock said, betraying some kind of Jewish heritage. Dad would have to take that up with the Ethics Committee. "I just know that plutonium is dangerous and I won't have it in my house. I don't even want it on my block."

"We discussed that, Smith. Right, Mr. Ashenwriste? You have the proof. Nuclear waste nowadays is about as dangerous as wet coffee grounds, especially with that new aerosol decontaminant they'll be coming out with pretty soon. All I have to do is store the waste somewhere safe until that stuff's perfected, and the rest of the time I'll be laughing up my sleeve." Unfortunately, he was in short sleeves because of the heat; once more, his imagery had backfired on him: laughing at his armpit indeed.

"It is the safest waste ever," Ashenwriste agreed.

"That's right," Dad said, "listen to him. And look at me. I'll give you the kind of proof that gets through your thick, numb skulls." Dad walked up past the podium, to the high table where Mr. Ashenwriste's briefcase was laid out among the tables and charts for overhead projection. From the open case he took a small metal bottle marked with a sign that indicated the contents were potentially radioactive.

Dad picked up the bottle, unscrewed the cap, and tapped one of the little blue-sheathed pellets into the palm of his hand.

He held it up for all to see, holding them hypnotized. He moved the pellet from side to side and their eyes followed it.

"It's tiny," he said. "It's got a protective coating that only comes off in the reactor. It's as goddamned safe as a goddamned jellybean."

He popped it in his mouth.

It went down like a vitamin, without water. He almost choked, but kept smiling.

Mr. Ashenwriste nodded to him, then to the assembly. He stepped off the podium, gathered his papers and samples—capping the metal bottle with silver-gloved hands, Dad noticed—and slid them all into his briefcase. Then he walked quickly from the room.

"It was a sample," said one of the Blue Flames. "A dud. No plutonium in it. You're the royal bullshit artist of them all, Bill
Johnson."

But they had all seen Mr. Ashenwriste's hasty departure, and judging from the look they gave Dad, he knew his demonstration had convinced them of something.

Dad swallowed again, fixing his eyes on Jock Smith. "Don't you believe me, Jock?"

Jock grew pale as Dad started toward him. Something in his eyes seemed to crack. In a moment he had backed through the crowd and vanished out a side door, leaving his Blue Flames to stare after him.

Good, Dad thought. Let 'em see what stuff he's made of. Let the Lodge Council call us up on trial. Then we'll really see something.

"So, Marv," he said, noticing the man's eyes resting uneasily on Dad's stomach. "You're not ready to go nuke, eh?"

"Sorry, Bill, I just remembered a, uh, picnic I had to help with." Marv slipped away.

It was the same with his other friends: "Sorry, Bill." "Later, Bill."

He watched them leaving him alone, wondered what had gotten into them. Meanwhile, in the depths of his belly, he could feel the mother of all belches coming on.

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"Where's P.J.?" Dad asked, and then let loose a terrific burp that masked the sounds of Virgil's sudden choking. Peter John's place was conspicuously empty at the dinner table; Wolfie kept jumping into the chair.

"I got a call from Kurt Foster," Connie said. "You remember, that handsome blond boy. P.J.'s staying at his place tonight."

"What's the matter, he can't call himself?"

"It doesn't matter, Bill," she said. "The important thing is that he's seeing more of his friends again . . . his boyfriends, that is."

"Oh." Dad dipped a forkful of pork chop into the applesauce. "I see what you mean. That Kurt is a pretty, uh, good-looking kid.
Rugged features. I like that in a boy." "I guess P.J. does too," Connie said.

Dad belched again. His breath smelled curiously antiseptic. He pushed away his insta-serve, chewing the inside of his mouth, then shook his head and pulled the insta-serve back. Those damned Blue Flames were trying to make him neurotic. Jock Smith especially: that business about plutonium being too dangerous to keep around the house. What did people think Jock would be stuffing into his warheads—confetti and party favors?

He forced himself to finish the meal. A hearty appetite was a good sign, or so he thought. Encouraged, he polished off a pint of ice milk.

Dad wondered why he was so nervous. Who's making me nervous? There's no need . . . stuff's safe . . . safe as cotton candy.

He went to sleep early, thinking it would be the best thing for his indigestion, and with the aid of a double dose of Num-Tums was soon dreaming. They were not pleasant dreams, and he awakened sometime after midnight, clutching his stomach. He forced himself to relax, patted his belly to soothe it.

His intestines shook thunderously, then began to speak in a modulated voice, high-pitched like the squirting of bubbles. "Bbbilll
..."

"Oh, Christ," he said. He looked at Connie to see if she had heard, but she slept on.

"Lisssten to meeee, Billll."

He rolled over, hoping that Connie would waken, and clamped the pillow over his head. But the sound was in his body; it resonated on his diaphragm, echoed on up through his bones.

"Forrrget abbbbout gassss. Weee cannn have ssssuch ffffun togetherrrr."

"Who are you?" he yelled, sitting up.

Connie rose onto her elbows. "Bill? Are you having a dream?"

"Yeah," he said. "I'm awake now. It's all right, hon, go back to sleep."

He was covered with sweat. As she sank back into the bed, he slipped out and padded into the bathroom.

He slammed the door shut but did not turn on the light.

Dad sank onto the toilet and, with a shudder, voided himself. His bowels whistled with relief.

"I." Squirt. "Am." Squilch. "The." Pft. "Fffuture."

As Dad sat listening to the dying complaints, Connie turned on the light in the bedroom. He remembered, then, that he had shut the door. Slowly, he opened his eyes.

The light, sickly and bluish, was coming up through his legs.

His shout woke him once more, this time for real.

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At that time P.J. was also living a nightmare. His journey had gained a heightened, hallucinatory quality due to his lack of sleep, yet his suffering was the most real he had ever experienced. There were no drugs to comfort him, no bed to crawl into, no footsteps to retrace, no light to guide him either forward or back or in any direction. He was lost, starving, freezing, and now drowning.

The previous night had been nothing like this. There had been a chill in the air but no rain, and he had kept warm by marching northward, following the coast, traveling near the road but not on it. There was no traffic on the highway, but once he saw stationary lights ahead of him—houses—and he went far out of the way to avoid them. He went into the hills.

At dawn he had still been in the hills. He wondered if he should sleep in one of the dry ravines, but his excitement at freedom was too great. Seeing ramshackle houses on the hilltops, he stayed in the ravines wherever possible, hidden. The day passed slowly. Sitting on a sun-warmed rock, he tore the lid from an insta-serve and found the contents cold and desiccated, inedible.

By dusk he was ravenous. He kept walking to keep his mind off his stomach. Reaching the top of a hill, he found that mist had obscured the coast and was climbing swiftly up the slope to meet him. There were houses down by the road, but he was not ready to give himself up to them. He turned and ran along the inland side of the hillcrest, toward a forest. It was there, when night fell, that he became lost. Trees and bushes tore at his skin, the rain turned everything underfoot to mud, and he found himself sliding into a ravine. In the dark he could not scramble free, and so he followed its course. The downpour filled the ravine with water drained from the hills; he was knocked down more times than he could count by things washing into him from behind, and sometimes he clung to them to keep from drowning in the deepening torrent. He had lost his pack—he had no idea when. He thought that he was bleeding, torn in a thousand places, he thought that he would certainly die.

And then he saw the bridge.

It stood out against a tangle of wind-thrashed trees and patches of sky, thanks to a lamp burning above it. In that light he saw that the stream was partially dammed by branches and bushes that had become tangled in the shadow of the bridge; he thought that if he could climb through them, he might be able to pull himself up and out of the stream.

The current finally carried him into the dam. Lamplight shone on the churning water several feet away, but he felt too weak to move that far against the flood. Still, he tried, and succeeded in falling backward into the mass of loose wood that clogged the channel; his thrashing tore it loose, and he was swept away again.

At the far side of the bridge he saw the lamp again and cried out, reaching toward it. His hand caught a thick, hard fiber, like a smooth rope; he saw it was a root that dangled from the side of the ravine.

For awhile it was enough to hang there, gathering strength, but when he had to move again he believed that resting might have been a mistake. His greatest desire was to sleep. But he dragged himself hand over hand up the root, caught

the other twisting anchors of the same tree higher up the bank, and finally dragged himself over the mud onto high ground.

There was no respite. He could hear the earth behind him sloshing into the river, dragged down by the constant erosion and perhaps helped along by his transit; so he had to move before he was sucked away again. He crawled back toward the light, haunted by its twin image reflected in the metal surface of the bridge: a drowned lamp. When his hand touched the lantern post, he slowly stood upright and looked over the bridge to see where it led.

The rain let up, then stopped completely, leaving a hush.

Against the clouds he could see a hillside, trees growing along its rounded silhouette as evenly as the pickets of a fence. Where the trees ended, higher on the slope, he saw with startling clarity row upon row of crosses.

Crosses. There must be a church somewhere near. He was almost physically overcome by a memory of warmth, of Christmas services in the neighborhood, of voices singing hymns and heads bowed in prayer.

Water drizzled from the trees, spattered on the road. P.J. turned around, still clinging to the lamppost, and looked in the other direction. Through the trees he saw a squarish gleam, like a sheet of water or glass. A dark window.

His tennis shoes squeaked as he hobbled down the road. The trees drew back, until he could see a row of houses between them.

The road wound down past the houses and out of the trees, onto open land. Because the houses were dark, he kept going until he was out beneath the sky. The clouds had begun to thin, and clear air and stars were appearing in patches, when ahead of him he saw the church with all its windows lit.

Voices murmured through the walls of the building. It sounded like singing. He hurried, but when he reached the church he discovered that he was at its rear.

It would be safe. Churches were refuges. He must be far enough away from the neighborhood by now that it would be all right to accept a little hospitality, make some human contact.

The windows were of dark glass, scarlet and violet, even black, like captured lightning. As he walked alongside the church he could make out the shapes—distorted through the windows—of the singers standing in rows within. The music was familiar, though the words were unclear.

"Onward, Christian Soldiers," that was it. He started to hum the tune, but he couldn't remember the words without a hymn-book in hand.

He had a bad moment when he realized that he had walked out into the middle of the coast highway without seeing it coming. The dotted line ran as far as he could see in either direction. In the moonlight that peeked through the clouds he saw that the road was deserted. He was still safe.

If he had been afraid of approaching the church, his sight of the front door took away any doubt. It was brightly lit, the doors were open wide on the vestibule, and above the entryway were blue neon letters: THE CHURCH OF THE OPEN ROAD.

Below that, smaller painted letters on a pair of opposing signs informed him that "Good Sam Presides Herein" and "Travelers Are Welcome!" There was another sign that he thought he was misreading somehow; it implied that services ran twenty-four hours a day.

The singers finished their rousing chorus and the church grew as silent as a television with the picture on but the sound turned down. P.J. was a little nervous about walking into such a silence, so he went only as far as the vestibule, thinking that he would wait for them to start the next song. But no sooner had he stepped out of the wind and set a foot on the deep red carpet, than the doors at the far end of the chamber swung open on the interior of the church, revealing all the singers with their backs turned to him. He stepped forward—expecting that whoever had opened the door would be coming out—and the doors shut.

Only then did he notice the electric eye at the entrance. It was an automatic door.

For some reason he felt more nervous than before. He looked back at the road and remembered the chill of the wind, and the possibility of more rain. His clothes felt frozen to him like a second skin.

He continued on past the threshold, the inner doors swung open, and he went on through. The next hymn was just starting.

He stood against the rear wall. Warmth filled him, the air resonated with the sound of voices lifted in prayerful song. He closed his eyes and gave thanks that he had survived the storm. His stomach was boiling with hunger . . . but he was alive.

Thinking of what a mess he must look, he opened his eyes. Fortunately no one had turned around to stare at him. All of them — all the dads and moms, grandparents and kids ranked among the pews—were staring toward the front of the church, where a cross hung high up in the shadows, glimmering with red jewels.

He shuddered, suddenly weak. The events of the last two days had drained him, but until now he had not found a moment to pause and rest. Before his legs gave out, he decided to get to a seat.

There was a space at the end of the hindmost pew. He limped to it, readying himself with a smile to greet the old man who stood there.

One hand on the back of the bench, he turned to look down the row. He stopped, stared, and did not move for a full minute; but he was not nearly as motionless as the rest of the congregation.

They were lifelike statues, manikins, cast into poses of worship and fastened to the floor. Blank eyes staring, filled-in mouths gaping, blank hymnals in their pawlike plastic hands. Now he saw the speakers along the edges of the pews, spewing forth the songs.

In mid-verse, the song ended.

P.J. backed out of the pew. The speakers crackled, and an organ note began to vibrate the floorboards. Above the note, a calm voice said, "Welcome, traveler. The Church of the Open Road welcomes you to take your fill of spiritual and physical nourishment. Join us in our songs, join us in our prayers. You will find holy refreshment at the front of our church—an offering to you, brother or sister.
Welcome."

P.J.'s eyes fixed on a brass collar hung around the throat of the gray-haired manikin nearest him. Engraved on the collar was the name WALTER S. TELLER. The matron beside the first manikin was ESTELLE V. TELLER. All the dummies had names.

The church filled with song once more. P.J. stood in the middle of an aisle, looking back at the door through which he had come.

Refreshment, he thought. Food.

Was it worth it to stay in a church full of statues if he could get something to eat?

His stomach howled at him. Yes!

He turned away from the door and walked down the aisle, convinced that the dummies were watching him with painted eyes.

The pulpit was empty, but before it was a huge white chest with a silver handle. By the time he reached it, he was almost used to the idea of the manikins: at least there would be no one to see him, no one to tell the neighborhood that he had passed through, no witnesses. He grasped the handle, which was icy, and pulled up the lid.

A cloud of frosty air rushed over him. Through it he could see platters of food, bowls of fruit, a huge bottle of red wine, cold cuts. He reached for a cube of some pressed, pale orange meat and was already reaching for another by the time it touched his tongue. It was firm, slightly fishy-flavored, like a mild salmon. He crammed an apple in his mouth, but it was mushy and he dropped it after one bite. More of the orange meat. He pulled the cork out of the wine bottle and took a huge swallow, washing down several more of the resilient salmony cubes.

His gut clenched as the wine reached his stomach. He gasped, dropping the bottle; he had eaten too fast. Or . . .

His knees hit the floor, the edge of the chest banged his forehead. He grabbed the cold rim of the chest, looking up at the pulpit through swimming eyes. A small beam of light illumined the cross in the peak of the roof; red eyes glinted down at him, and the black chasm of a voracious mouth yawned like a little pit that had begun to swallow up all the light in the room.

The last thing he saw was a bald manikin head rising over the pulpit, its shiny blue eyes lit from within.

"Welcome, brother or sister," said a gentle, wavering voice. "You have tasted the kingdom to come, the savor of our savior. Now you shall hear the songs on the flip-side of life. You will fight among doves. You will live in death forever, for having eaten you may never leave."

The ice-chest slammed shut on his fingers, and P.J. fell backward in the middle of a scream that would still be waiting for him when he woke.

WHY ACCELERATED GROWTH?

A Pamphlet by Dr. Ralph Edison

You might as well ask, "Why an accelerated world?"

Every day, each of us is faced with a seemingly endless series of complex issues— moral and logistical—many of them new to the earth. If asked for answers to modern problems, metaphysicians can only grope for answers, rarely admitting that they don't even understand the question. Often the mystics hedge by telling us that we cannot know. Science, on the other hand, acknowledges that while we do not know all the answers, or even all the questions, there is always hope.

The world changes quickly, but we can keep abreast of the tide by changing at a slightly faster pace. New men have new minds, they won't accept old answers, they don't see things strictly in terms of the old-fashioned points of view.

Consider the microbe. Consider the pest. Reproducing in vast numbers, living brief but busy spans of time, bacteria and insects have outlasted the dinosaurs, seen the earth through a procession of geologic and climactic upheavals, and remain today to share a mute lesson of survival with those who can interpret their dumbshow.

There is a chain of being and nonexistence: birth, life at its harshest and mildest extremes, reproduction, and then death. Somewhere in this ever-repeating chain, something called adaptation occurs. The tiny, swift creatures are masters of the art.

They live in colonies. They live in hives. They reproduce by fission, or breed under circumstances of extreme compression. There is no privacy: everything must be shared. And yet the strongest in the system continually weed out the weak, doing a better job at ensuring survival of the fittest than the random threats of nature; for the citizen wasp knows the weak points in his hive much better than, say, a stray tidal wave or rogue plague.

The system is intensely self-aware, though perhaps not in a sense we normally associate with awareness; it picks at its flaws as a boy picks a scab, making way for new growth.

The system is dynamic. It maintains its integrity over the epochs, becoming an ever more perfect specimen of itself, even while the individual cells—the single locust, the herpe solipsist—are born, live briefly, slough away, and are no more remembered except for their fleeting contributions to the social continuum.

This is our goal: to learn from the microbe.

To play the game of our chromosomes—lethal to losers—at their own level.

To survive.

Dad got to work late Monday morning, but it was no big deal. A datastorm had kicked up in the rush of the first hour, and by the time he arrived his co-workers were soaring around with nets as light as cobwebs, catching the few stray bits and shaking them into wide-mouthed chutes. He was just in time for the first break, although there would be plenty of processing to do later. He sat on a lavender cloud next to the shapely simusecretary, smiling at the feel of her hand on his thigh, while around him warm currents smelling of scotch and expensive cologne bore faint erotic images like old blue-movie reels unrolling in the air. His sour stomach was literally in another world, in an aging overweight body. Of course, it would be waiting for him when he got off work.

The simusec'y had just begun to follow his lead toward a more fantastic use of their fifteen simulated "minutes" when the tousled head of a husky adolescent peeked over the edge of his cloud and said, "Bill? We've got some trouble."

"Hal Frost? Haven't seen you here in dogs' years. Whatever it is, it can wait. I'm on my break."

Frost jumped up onto the edge of the cloud and Dad protested as he felt the girl evaporate.

"What's the big idea?"

"This is off-line trouble, Bill. It's about your son Peter John, and mine too."

Uh-oh, Dad thought, imagining the scenario: Hal barges into Kurt's room and finds the boys tussling with a bit too much skin showing. He began to wonder if he should have listened to Doc Edison so much when they were planning the family; maybe a second opinion would have been a good idea, all those years ago.

But there was no one in the neighborhood to give a second opinion.

"I'll meet you at your place," Frost said.

Dad felt the cloud solidifying beneath him, turning into a desk and chair. He found the door and went into the hall, leaving Frost to find his own way out. In the dark curtained area at the end of the hall, he closed his eyes and felt for the pads on his head and hands. Disengagement was accomplished with an electronic squeak and accompanied by a sudden attack of heartburn. His stomach was worse than ever.

There was a memo from Connie waiting on his desk: "Come to den."

A sharp black piano wire of pain seemed to thrum between his heart and his gut for a moment. He held himself upright against the desk, reached for his pack of Num-Tums, and swallowed half a dozen of the pills in a single gulp. By the time he reached the den he was yawning from the medication, and Connie's inexplicable tears only made him smile and look slowly around the room for something that might calm her—say, a soft animal toy. The first rush of comfort, however, was fleeting.

Aside from Connie, there were in the den a half dozen people he had not expected, including Hal Frost, who after all must have sent a sim to fetch him from his office. He was momentarily irked at not having been summoned in person.

Hal got up from the couch, leaving his wife and son sitting, and grasped Dad's shoulders as if to steady him. It looked like a lynching: every one was so grim. Dad stifled a burp, which broke the mood—his mood, anyway. The taste of Num-Tums chased away his doubts.

"Bill, we have something to tell you."

Dad looked past Hal Frost at Connie, who seemed unable to move with Wm. D. Jr. and Stephanie weighing down either leg. She stared at him, her mouth trembling, her hands scrabbling like nervous claws over the kids' scalps.

"You want a Tums?" he asked her.

"Bill, I know this is hard for you," Hal said, getting in his way.

"Maybe you should be with Connie right now."

"Don't beat around the bush with the poor bastard," said a man he had never expected to see in his living room, a man with a wound-up face and an entertaining collection of nervous gestures.

Douglas Taylor was chief of Neighborhood Security.

"So I'm a bastard, am I?" Dad said mildly. "You all storm into my house to call me names? Who let you in anyway?"

"Your son P.J. got out of the compound," said Taylor. "Night before last. Kurt was covering for him, but the records don't lie. The gate was opened and something bigger than a dog went through." Taylor glared over at Kurt Frost, who could not possibly have sunk any deeper into the sofa than he had. "The monitor tapes were blank for several minutes."

Dad stood smiling, feeling his stomach relaxing at last. His thoughts drifted on a pleasant, placid tide, in and out: through his heart, then to his fingertips, through his lungs, feeding his brain. In and out. P.J. was a good kid.

"He's outside, Johnson, didn't you hear me?"

Taylor came closer, with one of his deputies. Hal Frost turned around and grabbed Kurt by the shoulder of his jacket and yanked him to his feet. Dad was a little disturbed to have the youth thrust at his face and shaken by his father.

"I-I-I'm sorry, Mr. J-Johnson, b-but it was P-P.J.'s id-d-dea!"

"It's sewage treatment for you, kid," said Douglas Taylor. "Forget about going into hydroponics."

"Shut up, Taylor," said Hal, shoving Kurt back at the sofa. "I don't know what to say, Bill. There isn't any way I can see of making this up to you. He's gone out."

"Out there," Connie whispered. "Out . . . there!"

"That P.J.," he said loudly, beaming, and they all stared at him as he gave a great laugh. "He's really something, that kid. I always told him he'd go far, you know it?"

"He's gone to his death, you clown," said Taylor.

The insult almost upset Dad—almost. By now he was getting used to the Num-Tums. He could take over and keep himself afloat, didn't need no paddles, no life-preserver, no. He could face the big reality. Yep. He could handle it. He was big. He was tough. He was Wm. D. Johnson. He was Dad.

He caught Connie's eyes and something shot out of them, ricocheted through his head, punctured skull and soft tissue in so many places that he felt himself deflating slowly, slowly, as with his hands he tried to cover all the holes in his face and stop the highpitched whining, like a baby's screams, that was coming out of him. Bad luck. No more Tums. He was coming down hard without a parachute.

"Outside?" he heard himself whisper. "Where the hell is that?"

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Later, the Johnsons sat in their den with the widewall TV turned almost all the way down. Neighbors and authorities had left them to their grief. Stephanie wept because her mother wept. Nancy June stared out the window at the fence around the back yard, sniffing.

Virgil sat with his head in his hands. The twins were watching TV. "Peter John," Connie whispered. "What did we do to you?"

Her husband squeezed her and gave a grunt of resignation. "It was his decision, Connie."

"P.J.," she said, shaking her head. "He had no idea what it was like out there, Bill. No one ever told him ..."

"That's because no one knows. How long has it been since any of us have been out?"

"Maybe," Virgil said loudly, "maybe he'll run right into another neighborhood like ours, and they'll take him in."

Dad shook his head. "There just aren't that many, Virg." Virgil let his head sink forward, looking miserable.

"Let me show you," Dad said. He got up and went to the TV, carrying a finger-sized cylinder that Douglas Taylor had lent him with a laugh when Dad had suggested starting a search. He slipped it into the tape-cradle and closed the cover, ignoring the complaints of the twins.

The wall lit up with an abstract illustration: luminous dots of several colors, green and white stripes, black patches, huge stains of blue overlain by silvery whorls. Dad kept on the controls and the image shrank, becoming a globe for a moment: it was planet Earth, but retouched by a crazed cartoonist with a penchant for india ink.

"Wrong way," Dad muttered, and the image began to grow. He centered on the western coast of North America, and it became immediately obvious that aside from the superimposed silvery vectors of wind, and the deeper dark blue ones indicative of ocean currents, there was little to see. Virtually all of the continent, with the exception of a few white mountain caps, was smudged or overlain with glossy blackness, as if tarps of all sizes had been thrown over the countryside. In places they did not quite meet, and here a few glittering dots appeared. America was the new dark continent.

"What's wrong with the map?" Virgil said.

"It's been censored," Dad said. "The question is, did Taylor's department do it, or has everybody on the planet thrown up screens to keep the photosatellites guessing? That I can't answer. Let's see what hasn't been hidden."

He touched one of the glowing dots near the coast, a diamond eye winking out between the unmatched corners of four black sheets. The voice of the map said, "Ruined sheepfold, circa 1987." Another: "Municipal dump: no current activity." Another: "Overturned pickup truck, probably a Studebaker."

"The sats have good eyes," Dad said, "but it doesn't sound like there's much to look at. Guess it's calmed down since we left it. Anarchy or tyranny . . . it was hard to tell what was going on when we moved in here. I've never looked back."

As he brought the picture closer to home, one little light grew brighter than the rest, and finally it resolved into a satellite image. The charm of familiarity captured his attention, momentarily lifting the weight of oppression and fear that the censored landscapes had drawn down on him, and Dad stood back from the screen to watch his neighborhood running itself like a living toy. Mercurial waves flashed in the crescent bay, the beach itself gleamed as though coated in glass. The streets, and the roofs running alongside them, resembled a rather unimaginative schematic for silicon circuitry. There was also the movement, almost too tiny to discern, of humanity. He saw his lodge, a brick-red cross with alternating rings of gold and white at its center. He sighed, looking for his roof, but then his spell of fascination was

broken by a memory of P.J. getting a globe of the world for Christmas, and his eyes flicked to the thin black line that surrounded the neighborhood on all sides save the seaside.

Beyond the wall were roads, fields, hills, forests, all identified by illuminated letters; otherwise, he would not have been able to tell one from the other at this angle. He panned away from the wall, following the road to the north until it ended in a field of black.

"Taylor was right," he said. "How can we search for him in that?"

"Can't you do anything?" Connie said. "Bill? Do you mean to just leave him out there?"

He turned to her, and met her eyes, but there was no force in his words. "I can't follow him," he said. "There's no one in this community willing to go out there. The roads go who knows where? To robot plants somewhere? P.J. must have been crazy to leave, but it would be crazier to follow him. Don't you understand that, Connie?"

"I understand," Virgil said. "It's okay, Dad. No one expects you to do it."

"Well," Dad said, and shrugged, as if that would relieve him not only of responsibility but of pain. Biting his lip, tears in his eyes, he looked back at the map that was mostly black, and realized that he was the one who had most expected himself to go out through the gate on his own, to find his son. He glimpsed an endless option that flickered and forked like lightning in his mind, the possibility of following P.J. into a hidden world where anything might happen.

That was a harrowing moment. He stood paralyzed before the television until, with all his will, he had dismissed the idea as impossible.

With a quick jab of his thumb, he extinguished the map, and went to sit down next to Connie. He took Junior from her lap and held the baby's bottle while he drank. Anything, he would do anything to feel useful. Anything but—

"Oh my God," said Connie, starting forward so quickly that Stephanie almost spilled to the floor. Seeing her expression, Dad sniffed for the smell of burning food, thinking that she must have left something in the oven. But he smelled nothing, and there was no reason she would have had anything but insta-serves planned for dinner.

"My God, Bill, I just remembered." She planted Stephanie in his lap, next to Junior, and stood up, smoothing the pleats in the hips of her pants suit. "What a time . . ."

She looked frantic, but her eyes were brighter than they had been all afternoon.

"Bill," she said, "we have to get Erica today. Labor starts in twenty minutes."

His grip tightened inadvertently on the plastic bottle, forcing too much orange juice into Wm. D. Jr.'s mouth. The baby choked, juice spattered his shirt. He shoved the boy at Nancy June and hurried into the kitchen after Connie.

"It can't wait?" he said, catching her by the cabinets.

"We can't put her on hold this late. We have to be there—all of us—when she comes out." He was startled to see her whitened mouth work itself into a slow, rigid smile. "And we have to be happy to see her."

"Happy?" he bellowed. "Happy is the farthest damn thing from our minds. Just look at them." He pointed into the den where their children formed a family portrait of misery, framed by the sides of the door. The twins were the exception, but they were beginning to realize what had happened.

"They've got to cheer up," Connie said. "Get the car ready, would you please, Bill? I'll get something to raise their spirits—"

He caught her by the wrist. "No medicine."

Half turning to him, she said, "Why not?"

"I—" He was thinking of the Num-Tums, of how hard he had come down, and the distorted happiness he had felt upon learning of P.J.'s disappearance. But he couldn't explain all that now. "Let's do this without drugs."

"I'll just get my purse," she said. "Oh, hurry, Bill."

She ran on upstairs, and Dad went into the garage through the door next to the fridge. The mammoth Venturon recreational vehicle took up half of the hangar-sized space, its spiraling aerials and bristling antennae almost scraping the ceiling. Dad avoided the treacherous-looking path between toppled bicycles and went straight to the family car, a sleek, segmented red roadster with chrome tailfins and a detachable compartment for the kids. He touched the garage door opener and reached into the car to start it up; a fan whirred, the panel lit and bleeped until he prompted it to idle. Misty sunlight crept through the opening door and over the floor like a wave with corners and straight edges. He found himself staring into the glassy eyes of Jock Smith's binoculars in an upstairs window across the street.

"I'll get around to you, you vulture," he muttered. Jock seemed to lean closer. Dad suddenly thought of the delight the Smiths would take that evening, when they watched the Johnson Family Hour and saw William D. Johnson break down.

"Read my lips," Dad said, and held up his middle finger—or tried to. His fingers were crabbed and wouldn't cooperate. With a curse he went back into the kitchen.

Connie had rallied the children around the table to give them a pep talk, which she now finished with an admonition: "And if you can't manage to be happy, your father will take you aside and give you something to cry about. Dry your eyes, Nancy June; Virgil, tuck in your sweater."

The family trooped together to the waiting car, which greeted each of them by name as they found their seats. Dad glanced over his shoulder into the attachment and winced at the empty spot where P.J. should have been sitting. Jock, he noticed, had deserted his post.

As the car drove into the street, Dad saw an arrow of glare floating in the misty air beyond Connie's window. Unusual. The windows darkened automatically in the diffuse sunlight, and suddenly he could see the beam with ease: a tightrope stretching from the eaves of Smith's house to somewhere behind the car. Dad nearly pinched a nerve trying to look around, but all he saw was the garage door falling like a portcullis. Now there was no stray laser fire to be seen. He checked Smith's windows, but they were still empty. Eyestrain, he told himself, though he half expected to see Smith lying sniperlike among the junipers.

"Our cruising speed will be twenty-five miles per hour," said the car. "We will reach the input destination at 4:57."

"Erica's due at five ten," Connie said, giving Dad a brief smile that had something of real pleasure in it. "But I should be there for the labor at five."

He shrugged. "I don't see why they can't just send her over when she's ready."

Connie sighed. "Men."

***

Nurses in powder-blue frocks scattered before them like pigeons, nearly spilling their cups of coffee when the Johnsons rushed into the predelivery room. Connie looked for Dr. Edison, expecting to find him sitting down dunking a donut into a steaming paper cup, as was his wont when she came to pick up a child. She was surprised when she finally looked through the glass partition making up one wall and saw him out on the floor among the machines, near the row of timebake units, an electrical plug in one hand, a pair of shiny tongs in the other.

"You can go in, Mrs. Johnson," she was told by a nurse. "He's expecting you."

"I'm gonna feel sick," Dad said. "I'll meet you in the waiting room, honey."

"I'll go with you, Dad," said Virgil. "I want to read the magazines."

By the time she looked back, they had deserted her. She understood that Bill was disoriented by the delivery room, with its aisles of machinery—strange looking waldos with claw-hands that lifted instruments and set them down and directed narrow beams of colored light into dilating apertures—by the heat of the incubakers and autoclaves, and the heterogeneous muddle of mucky sounds and tangy birth smells. She understood: this was a woman's place, or would have been if not for Dr. Edison.

She told the other kids to follow their father—Stephanie had already been left in a nursery—but Nancy June protested.

"No, Mom, I want to see the birth. Can I, please?"

Connie sighed, but she was touched. "If I say yes, will you take Junior and the twins back to the waiting room first?"

"Sure!"

"Okay, then."

Nancy took Wm. D. Jr. from her arms, hefted him over her shoulder, and whirled through the swinging doors, herding Lyndon Baines and Lady Bird ahead of her. A moment later she was back to take Connie's hand.

"If only P.J. were here," she said with a brave, sad smile.

"Please, Nan, not now."

They went into the delivery room together.

Dr. Edison's voice rose above every other sound in the long, cluttered room. It was loud but not deep, and authoritative without sounding certain. Connie had a sense of recklessness as she steered her way through the robot carts, but she was unsure if it was the doctor's or her own; everything in his offices seemed a little bit out of control, as if to make up for the restraint that usually pervaded the rest of the neighborhood.

"Where's the mother?" she heard him say. "Damn it, nurse, get out of my way!"

As Connie came closer to the focus of the room's flurry, Nancy June's hand tightened in hers, and she glanced down to see her daughter looking terrified.

A woman's scream cut through the clamor, silencing no one. It came from a speaker on the wall above the oven door, where Dr.
Edison now stood looking at his watch.

"All right," he said. "Induction."

He flourished the electrical cord in his hand and plugged it into an outlet near the door.

The screams were coming regularly now, vibrating the light bulbs in the hooded lamps that cast angular shadows all about this end of the room. Now the lights began to dim and a blue radiance softened the edges of the tables and waldos. Dr. Edison turned, a ghost in a luminous white sheet, and spotted Connie coming toward him.

"You're late, young lady," he barked. "Get over here and do your thing."

The next thing she knew, a nurse had separated her from Nancy June and slipped a microphone into her hand.

"Go on," the doctor said, "yell your head off."

She had forgotten about this, the pre-birth screaming that Doc Edison said strengthened the bond between mother and child. How, precisely, it strengthened that bond, Connie could never quite figure out. The speaker above the oven fell silent, waiting for the real thing. She paused to take a deep breath, and Dr. Edison took a step toward her, brandishing his tongs.

"Yell, I said!"

Connie screamed with all her breath, stripping the interior of her throat.

"Louder, Connie! Again, again!"

She screamed, screamed, screamed. P.J.'s face came to mind, coupled with the thought—recently inseparable—of the sharpened crucifix coming down hard beneath the blow of a heavy hammer. She screamed at that. She was thinking of the wall now; the wall that surrounded their houses, their golf course, their beaches; the wall that kept all of them in and everything else out; the wall that poor Peter John had breached; and all she could do was scream. Eight children, nine children, ten, how many more? Screaming, bellowing. Families on every side, they have eight kids, we'll have nine: a senseless howl. Now she was shrieking, she was pain and little else. Insta-serves: help! And sleeping pills: no, please, the agony! Something for the pain? At last she could scream, only here, only now, only for this single, small, all-too-rare occasion.

"Goal!" cried Dr. Edison.

He tore the microphone out of her hands, prying it from her fingers with a special tool made for the purpose. In the next instant he had forced her down on her knees before the oven, spread her arms wide to receive the gift. Everything was silent, though she heard Nancy moaning.

Ding! went the timer.

With a raucous laugh, Dr. Edison yanked on the oven door. A light went on in the chamber.

"Looks done," said a nurse.

"Of course it's done," said the doctor. "She's done, I mean. To perfection, no thanks to you. If she were a soufflé, she would have fallen."

Dr. Edison grinned down at her, looking as though he'd had to chip away parts of his dry, wrinkled face to accommodate the smile. "You know, I usually don't give a birth this much attention, but this is a special day for the neighborhood. Get ready, my dear."

Connie put out her hands. Doctor Edison reached into the chamber and took out a silver bundle that looked like a huge potato wrapped in aluminum foil. With his tongs he tore into one end of the package. A puff of steam fogged his eyeglasses.

"Ah, a beauty," he said. "Come on, you take her from here."

Connie received the crinkly silver bundle without hesitation; it was only when she saw her daughter's face that she trembled.

She had seen seven children come into the world, the last four of them from the oven. They had all looked much the same: mottled, frail, glistening with blood or incubation fluid, red in the face, hollering with powerful lungs.

Not Erica. She was none of these things. As the last of the steam wisped out around her face leaving only a few beads of moisture to dry in an instant, Connie saw that her daughter, so silent, was a solid shade of blue-gray.

It's the light, she thought, but the bulbs were reverting to white and the change made Erica's color even more obvious.

"She's gray, Mommy," Nancy said. "What makes her gray?"

"New blood," said Dr. Edison. "The latest. Believe me, she'll need it."

Erica's pupils were dull silver rings, like lead washers.

Connie swallowed, unsure if she wanted to peel away the rest of the foil. The decision was made for her by Erica, who began to beat at the covering from within, denting the wrapper with punches of her little hidden fists: first one hand burst into view, then the other, and she shredded the foil from her chest.

"Perfect," said the doctor.

"Why doesn't she cry?" Connie whispered as the nurses bent over her.

The flat gray eyes sank into Connie's consciousness.

"Smile, now, mother. Let her know that you love her."

That was harder than Connie would have thought. When she believed she had summoned a semblance of motherly love, she said,

"Come on, little love-child, come on, please cry, do something."

Erica narrowed her huge eyes, as if she understood, and slowly drew her lips back into the rictus of a molested dog. The surgical lamps shone on a full set of sharp teeth the color of graphite.

"She has nothing to cry about," said Dr. Edison. "Shall we take her to the party?"

***

In the midst of bright party lights of all colors, where the air was full of wild music and a constant drizzle of confetti, Dad felt like a dead man. In spite of this, he forced himself into jollying the children and greeting Erica Valentine Johnson with laughter as loud as he could manage. He took the little silver bundle in his hands, tossed it in the air, and was startled to hear a snarl from his newborn daughter at the peak of her trajectory.

He almost dropped her.

When she was safe in Connie's arms again, he looked at his family with a questioning eye. The twins looked startled in identical ways.

"She's gray, daddy," said Lyndon Baines.

"She's blue," said his sister.

"She's like that because she's not like us," said Nancy June protectively. "She's better."

"Now, Nancy," Connie said, "It's not that she's better—"

"Better?" said Lyndon, looking disgusted. He started to grab at Erica, as if he might run and throw her out the window if he could get her away from Connie, but Connie pulled her out of his reach.

Dr. Edison stepped between Lyndon and Connie, his eyes turning angrily to Dad. "Johnson, keep a rein on your kids. This is no time to squabble. Line up and I'll give you all pep-shots."

Dad mumbled, "I don't want another shot."

"What's that? Speak up, Bill."

Dad felt himself blushing like a teenager.

"I said I don't feel like a shot," he said, a bit louder, all too conscious of this rebellious tone. His embarrassment made him bluster.

Edison smiled as though he were biting his lips. It was a smile that said, "I know what makes you tick, Wm. D. Johnson the Elder. I know all about you and your family. I know, psychology-wise, why you have the number of kids you do, and I've seen your scraggly chromosomes—which look like unraveling sweater sleeves, by the way—and I've lit up much more of your lovely wife than you have. I know all about what went on between you and

Doris Smith, and why you really have it in for her husband. Why, Bill," that smile seemed to say, without even unsealing to speak, "I even know your middle name."

No wonder Dad felt nervous in Dr. Edison's presence. He had the dirt on everyone.

"Bill," the doctor said gently, "I wonder if I could speak to you in my office."

With a nod to the nurse, who approached the Johnsons with a ready hypodermic revolver, Dr. Edison turned and headed toward the exit. Dad found himself following, unwillingly.

The doctor's office was crowded with devices, some only halfunpacked from their shipping containers: complicated configurations of lenses, plastic waldos, tweezers mounted on hover-jet dollies. An open cupboard, above a well-stocked wet bar, was crowded with vials and syringes in brilliantly labeled packages: FREE SAMPLES! . . . TRY THESE AND YOU'LL NEVER GO BACK TO . . . TRIAL DRUGS . . . NOT FOR RESALE . . . TOY SURPRISE INSIDE!

Dad looked for a place to sit. The visitor's chair was occupied by a microscope the size of a small boy.

Dr. Edison tugged a Dixie cup from a dispenser, peered into it, and blew out a bug or something. He reached for a flask of amber alcohol and looked inquisitively at Dad. "Drink?" he said.

"No thanks, Doc."

The doctor's expression narrowed. "You feeling well these days, Bill?" He poured himself a drink.

"I'm fine," Dad said.

"You've put on weight, I see. More than I expected. You don't get much exercise. I'm tempted to try you out on a new exermatic contraption I picked up last month: hook it into your PI and it gives you a workout while you work." Dad shrugged, still nervous.

"Look, Bill, have a drink." He held out the paper cup.

"I really don't want any," Dad said, suddenly angry. His eyes locked with Dr. Edison's, and they stared at each other for a full minute. Dad couldn't read anything of the doctor's thoughts, but he felt as if Edison were learning everything that was going on inside of him. Finally, the doctor nodded and raised a finger to Dad's left cheek; he let it rest just under the lashes of the lower lid.

"Iridology," he said. "That's the diagnostic tool of the future. It barely keeps up with my intuition, of course, but it's better than a lot of those damn machines the salesmen keep pawning off on me." He pulled the finger away and pointed at the microscope. "I mean, look at that. What can I do with a microscope these days? Watch matchheads and pretend they're the surface of the moon? I'm thinking about donating it to the museum. I mean hell, Bill, I've got a little box the size of your finger that will take holographic infrascans of your cells and float the images right in front of your eyes thirty seconds later, along with a damn clever little legend that points out any dysfunction. Teensy-weensy mitochondria blown up big as dimes. Sure you don't want a drink?"

Dad shook his head. "No, no, I don't want to confuse things any more than they are, Doc. You know what I mean?"

If Doctor Edison had worn eyeglasses, he would have been peering over them now. "I know what you're going through, and that's a different matter. Your eyes tell me that you're in the early stages of massive withdrawal: from what, I can't quite make out. The drug ring, which in you is normally a dark olive in color, seems to be . . . what color is magenta? I can never remember."

"I haven't had a Num-Tum in a few hours, I guess that's unusual.
The last one didn't settle well."

"Digestive trouble," the doctor said, still examining his eye.
"Eaten anything that might have disagreed with you?" Dad pursed his lips.

"How about your sex life? Getting enough lately?" Dad shrugged.

"You did ask Connie—"

"I asked her and she wasn't interested, Doc. That's her business, all right?"

Edison shrugged and turned away to replenish his drink. "I keep telling you, health is the whole family's business. You don't want to raise a crew of schizophrenics and catatonics."

"I feel like . . . I feel like the family is breaking up."

Dad's throat burned, but there—he had said it. It had come out easily, but until it was admitted, he hadn't realized that it had been nagging him since P.J.'s tantrum. Now his son was gone. So much for homosexuality rounding off the edges and bending the lines to bring them all together, to make the Johnsons converge into a neat little cohesive unit. With one of them gone, the whole thing seemed unstable, unworkable.

Suddenly his face was in his hands and he sank down onto the chair, forgetting the microscope. With a groan, the doctor lifted the device, making room for him, and then Dad felt a conciliatory pat on his shoulder. He sat there, hunched over with embarrassment, his palms filling with tears, trying to make as little noise as possible.

Breaking up, he thought, letting himself feel the possibility for the first time, savoring the pain of it as if that were the only way he could really experience his sorrow at P.J.'s absence. This is it. My family. Everything I worked for . . . breaking up.

"Bill, I hate to see a man drive himself crazy with worry. I'm going to give you a prescription and I want you to take it. I understand what you're going through; I've been watching your show for a few weeks now, and I think I saw this coming. Here, take this."

Dad felt a slip of paper pushed into his hands and he opened his eyes, thinking it would be a Kleenex. It was a prescription.

"Just remember that everything changes, Bill. Peter John has flown, but Virgil is about to marry. That will be like welcoming a new daughter into your home. And Nancy is due for her treatment. You're going to be dealing with a very different person there, I can assure you. She's been a little girl up to now. Your hands will be full, Bill. In the next couple of weeks alone, you'll find yourself forgetting about
Peter John. You will forget him. You will forget ..."

Dad nodded and with a final sigh, boosted himself to his feet with both hands pushing on his knees.

"In the meantime," the doctor said thoughtfully, "I'll have a talk with the Whelk Elders. There were plans to call you and Jock up for inquisition, but I'll see if that can be postponed."

"Thanks, Doc." Dad felt mysteriously relieved—perhaps reprieved. Had he been afraid of that inquisition, in spite of everything?

"You go on out there and welcome your daughter," said Dr. Edison. "Have a good time, Bill. Loosen up. Now, I have things to attend to here. You know the way back."

He clasped Dad's hand and winked. "You're about due for a treatment yourself, you know."

Dad stiffened. It had been years since the last one. He felt a physical pang—adrenalin, fear—that reminded his cells of the abrupt transitions from youth to maturity, from maturity to middle age and the beginnings of senescence. Another treatment . . . he should have known. He couldn't coast through his middle age forever. There was another reason he dreaded Dr. Edison: he held the needle that brought about rapid, painful transformation.

He found himself walking down the hall toward the sound of his family's laughter, but he was in a daze and was hardly aware that he had greeted them until he looked down and saw that Erica was sleeping in his arms. She looked unreal, gray-blue.

Here she is, he thought. My daughter. My idea, too. But I don't know that I'll want her in the house.

The Johnsons returned to their car through the slowly dying light of the long summer day. One more interruption awaited them, in the person of a tall man, elegantly dressed in subdued twilight colors, his hair dark yet silvered. He was standing near their car, looking toward the sea.

"Mr. Ashenwriste!" said Lyndon, running on to meet him. "Hey, Mr. Ashenwriste!"

The Cartel man laughed gently and tousled the boy's hair. He had played soccer with Lyndon and other neighborhood children in previous years; they were used to seeing him at picnics, drifting from table to table like every family's favorite eccentric uncle.

Now, though he smiled for the children, he avoided their attention and addressed the adults directly.

"Mr. Johnson, Mrs. Johnson, I have come to extend my sympathy over your son's departure. I'm sure this is a trying time for you, no less so with the birth of this child."

"Thank you, Mr. Ashenwriste," said Connie.

"The Cartel feels a debt of gratitude to both of you, for being such champions of home nuclear power."

Dad shrugged, flattered, at ease despite his worries. "Oh, the guys will come around eventually."

Mr. Ashenwriste gave a little bow. "Even so, we would like to help you as you have helped us. Your son, Peter John, is somewhere out there." He inclined his head toward the hills in the east. "Naturally, you cannot follow him."

"Well, my work load is pretty heavy."

"Please let us lift some of that load. Cartel personnel move freely, and there are many of us. We would make this offer whether or not you had decided to install the garage unit, sir, as a humanitarian gesture; but it will mean even more to us because P.J. is a Johnson.
Erica should grow up to know her brother."

Dad looked at Connie and saw that she was crying. She tucked her hands under his arm and pulled herself close to him.

"Thank you," Dad said gravely, softly. "Thank you very much, Mr. Ashenwriste. I—we're very touched."

Ashenwriste bent and extended his hand until Connie withdrew one of hers and held it out, whereupon he kissed it.

"It is the least I can do," he said. "The Cartel is behind me in this."

"Well," said Dad honestly. "That, if nothing else, gives me hope."

"Rise and shine and give God the glory, glory!"

P.J. awoke to the clamor of reveille, and saw through half-shut eyes that it was still dark. His breath had condensed on the icy window next to his face, and candlelight caught in the beads of moisture. The heavy black bulks of trees crowded beyond the glass, as impenetrable, forbidding, and shapeless as his dreams. All around him, the boot-camp acolytes were stirring slowly, like pallid taffy things pulled from a writhing morass of flesh—it could have been the landscape of hell or another PSA flashback. Parascopalamine (or "the Periscope," as Good Sam called it) had been the mainstay of his consciousness for the past . . . how long had it been now? A week? A month since he'd strayed into the fold along the dotted line? The Good Samaritan's injections had blurred the borders of light and dark during the first part of his stay; day and night had less meaning than black and white. In his interrogation sessions, whirling lights befuddled him; he was made to chant hymns until hyperventilation propelled him beyond the time-bound membranes of his rational cells; he mumbled prayers on his hands and knees; and already he had learned to dissemble, clean, and reconstruct a DOV missile hand-cannon with his eyes closed.

Finally, in the course of picking P.J.'s memories, Good Sam had found that P.J. was a proficient ideomotor responsive typist, and since then it had been more of the same old grind he had left home to escape. The day started earlier, that was the biggest difference. There was an endless procession of memos and military reports, all encoded into alphanumerical nonsense beyond his understanding. One little typo could earn him a drug-enhanced punishment that went on for eternity. Looking through the Periscope, he had seen hell more often than he liked. Heaven, on the other hand, remained a transcendental carrot to be hung before the noses of the good rabbit soldiers. Crosses on a hillside: that was the be-all to end all around here.

Memos, memos, memos. Yet P.J. had the suspicion that Sam was priming him for something greater. Why else would he take such interest in a vagabond, no matter how great his typing speed?

"Brother Peter John," said Michael, the sepulchral adolescent whose cot was nearest P.J.'s, "get up."

P.J. mumbled. "I don't want to get up."

Michael pulled his khaki robe over his head and ran a hand through his stringy black hair. Despite the colorful cardboard placards all over the wall of their dorm and classrooms, reminding them to "Wash your body and your hair—God has noses everywhere," most of the grunts in Camp Samaritan had terrible acne and body odor problems. At first P.J. had been aware of a constant fishy reek about all of them; now it was his smell, too, and only rarely did he notice it. He thought it was related to the orange pressed food that composed the bulk of their diet: the Host, they called it.

Tardily, but not so late that he would incur the wrath of the Monitor, he rolled out of bed and dragged his robe and slippers toward him. For the moment that he sat there naked and shivering, too weak to finish what he had begun, he noticed that Michael was watching him sheepishly with sleep-crusted eyes. Seeing P.J.'s curiosity, the younger boy blanched, turned away with a jerk, and began rolling up his blankets.

"You shouldn't be so tired," Michael said, sounding out of breath. "You get to stay in the office all day while we're out training in the hills. You're lucky."

"I guess," said P.J. He yawned and stood up, and sudden dizziness disrupted the morning routine: he saw the long barracks room stretch to eternity, with a multitude of mussy, half-dressed boys flicking dirty stockings at each other to kingdom come.

The buzzer for morning prayers brought him back to his more mundane, but no less surreal, confines.

Hurrying out into the cold morning, in file, P.J. was surprised to find a tremor of pleasure in his steps. But the sky was like a sliverthin sheet of beautiful blue marble, where the moon hid all but a sickle of its face among clouds. Ahead of him, in the crease of the valley, the low metal buildings were smudged by ground mist into ghostly gray forms.

The girls trudged out of their barracks and fell in alongside the file of boys; there were no smiles exchanged, though a contagion of yawns spread quickly. All slippers flapped and shuffled in unison on the paved road. P.J. stared at the back of their dorm monitor's closecropped skull, firing imaginary white defensive open-vector missiles into the nape: there went a swift salvo of DOV's, wings unfolding, bright sharp-nosed blurs right on target. The monitor's head exploded like those of the practice manikins. He could always dream. Before the chill of the damp air had time to get into his bones, P.J. was inside the chapel. The stuffy, overheated air instantly dried his sinuses and made his eyelids rasp. He found his place among the pews, Michael to one side, a skinny weasel-faced individual named Jeremy to the other. Jeremy's problem was not some innate, weaselish character fault that had manifested in his features; it was malnutrition. He was allergic to the Host, the staple of their diet, and never got much to eat.

As the organ played, they bowed their heads as if to let the melody roll over them without meeting resistance. P.J. closed his eyes and found himself dreaming again.

There was the neighborhood. It was the first time he had thought of it since the last PSA interrogation; all the details of his past had been confiscated by Good Sam. Only in dreams did he see them now.

He drifted like a seagull over the familiar roofs. He could see Dad starting the lawn mower, and Mr. Smith in his backyard fiddling with his missiles. And his mother. He dived close to her as she scooped up Wolfie's turds from the backyard.

Mom, he tried to cry, I'm sorry I ran away. I should have stayed and tried to learn something more about myself. Maybe you could have answered the questions I was too scared to ask.

But she didn't see him, intent on her task.

Nancy? he called, and swooped up to her bedroom window. Shapes moved under the sheets. Arnold Smith's head appeared briefly, smiling, then ducked back. Floating in the open sky, he imagined muffled laughter underneath.

Virgil?

The breeze lifted him up until he could see the shore. Down in the bay, Virgil hauled his sailboat Argos into the waves. P.J. breasted the wind and descended as though down a flight of invisible stairs, a succession of soft bumps. But before he could come close enough to talk with his brother, a pointed elbow jabbed him in the side, and he straightened with a gasp, remembering where he was.

Good Sam's blue eyes stared down at him from the pulpit, but it was an impersonal stare, meant for all of them.

"Good morning, little lambs," he greeted his flock. "This day, let us give thanks for the savor of our savior, the eucharistic flavor, which we all shall eat on toast, his holy sacrifice, and pack in our lunches, plain or deviled, if you'll pardon the expression." No one laughed. It was too early.

"A moment of silence," said Good Sam, undisturbed by the lack of response in the chapel.

A moment of coughing ensued.

"And now our prayer."

All rose, put their hands together, and intoned to the red-eyed figurine crucified at the head of the church:

"We pledge artillery to the flag,
Of the United States of Armorica,
And to the revision for which it stands,
One reason under fire, inaccessible,
For everybody everywhere to love. Amen."

The figurine, swaddled in the rags of Old Glory, returned their cold stares, but did not answer.

"And now our little hymn. Just to stoke your appetites."

"Onward Christian Soldiers,
Marching into war.
With the guns of Je-e-su-us,
Spreading hope, and more ..."

***

"Creamed chipped Host on toast again?" someone complained, very quietly, as they entered the boys' cafeteria.

"Holy shit on a shingle."

Jeremy, in line next to P.J., made a gagging sound that he thought was in jest at first; but when he looked around, he saw Jeremy run out the door with his hand clamped over his mouth.

"Guess his allergy is getting worse," said Michael.

"So is the smell," P.J. said.

"Smells good to me," Michael said, "I'm used to it, I guess."

He moved toward the steam-trays full of the orange chunks floating in thick white sauce, which was ladled over brittle squares of toast. The workers who dispensed the food and stood in the steam wore rubber gloves and filter masks. P.J. received his meal without enthusiasm, and waited for Michael to pour himself a glass of orange juice.

There was a crash at the door to the cafeteria. Jeremy came flying into the room and stumbled into a post where he slumped to his knees, face red and mouth wet. After him came the Camp Monitor, Mr. Strong, a tall, bald man in knee-high black boots and a camouflage-patterned frock. A few kids, who had started to help Jeremy, backed away when they saw who had flung him through the door.

Mr. Strong grabbed Jeremy by the collar, pulled him upright, and pinned him to the post.

"What did I just see?" the Monitor demanded, putting his face mere inches from Jeremy's.

"I threw up," Jeremy gasped.

"You what?"

"I threw up, sir!"

"You dared to barf His sacrifice, His very flesh, for which He died so that you, you sniveling brat, might eat?"

Jeremy's voice was barely a squeak. "I didn't eat any, sir."

The huge hand tightened in the collar, twisting it like a tourniquet. "You refuse to accept His sacrifice?"

Jeremy choked, "I'm allergic . . . sir."

"We don't believe in allergies," said Mr. Strong, and he marched Jeremy toward the counter. P.J. moved out of the way.

The Monitor barked at the servers: "Fix this boy a heaping plate of whatever that is."

The goggled workers hurried to do as directed. Two slices of toast were drenched in a ladleful of the creamed mixture. P.J. saw Jeremy growing steadily paler.

"More," said Mr. Strong. "This boy has to eat."

The toast disappeared altogether beneath a viscous mound of the creamed stuff.

"More, more!"

At last, themselves trembling from the force of the Monitor's instructions, the workers gathered around to present Jeremy with his immense helping of creamed and possibly chipped Host on toast. Jeremy accepted it, swallowing again and again, his mouth shut very tight.

"Now," said Mr. Strong, as they had all known he would, "eat it."

Jeremy began to cry. Even so, he held his plate steady, turned on his heel, and went to a place that was cleared for him. Mr. Strong stood behind him staring down as Jeremy sat, picked up a fork, sniffed delicately, gagged discreetly, probed into the overwhelming mound, and recovered one dripping piece of Host.

He waited too long and the Monitor cuffed him alongside the head. "Chew it."

Jeremy placed it in his mouth, eyes closed, and his jaws worked only once. Then he swallowed and they all heard the gulp. He coughed, covering his nose and mouth, opened his watering eyes.

Mr. Strong's voice was soft and almost loving. "Eat," he said. "Eat it all up."

Jeremy did his best, but the serving was too great for him. Long before the toast itself was sighted through the sauce—and everyone was watching while their own meals grew colder—he dropped his fork, let his eyes roll up, and fell backward off the bench.

Mr. Strong called two boys to carry him to the infirmary. The rest of them, realizing that they had stopped eating in the last two minutes remaining of the breakfast period, gulped down their food. The Monitor gave them a look of contempt, then stalked out of the cafeteria.

P.J. could hardly swallow. Michael was trembling.

"He's gonna die," Michael said. "I know it. He had a real allergy. He's gonna die."

Crosses on a hill, P.J. thought, but he couldn't let himself dwell on Jeremy right now. Not while he was eating.

***

After breakfast the coeds marched in a little dish of flat land between the hills above the sea. After they marched, the youths were sent to study the Good Block for an hour in a computer library. The Good Block was Good Sam's cinegraphic version of the Bible, and it was rather different from the one P.J. remembered watching at home—not that he had watched it often enough to be sure. It seemed to be imaginatively conceived, full of action and combat scenes among primitive tribes, with dust devils and lightning aplenty.

It was P.J.'s duty to load the Good Block into its chilly cryoprocessor for display. From the control pulpit at the head of the library, he could watch his peers sitting in rows before their terminals, heads bowed, eyes closed, waiting for the bleep that would allow them to begin.

The Block was some kind of black man-made crystal (he could barely make out patent numbers along one edge) on which, according to the user's manual, spectral information had been stored at very low temperatures. When the crystal was returned to those temperatures, the frozen symbols became readable with the use of a computer-guided laser. It was kind of like having an elaborate film loop in an ice cube.

P.J. lowered the Good Block into the icebox and closed the lid, made sure that it was snug. He would need insulated mitts to remove it at the end of the session, but for now he had done his share.

"Thank you, Peter John," said Good Sam. "As usual, your proficiency with the technics of spirit is astonishing."

P.J. started back to his terminal, but Sam caught him by the sleeve. "Not today, my lad. We're moving you on to something more advanced."

At Good Sam's touch, P.J. almost screamed. He associated it too strongly with parascopalamine treatments. Sam's was the soft grip that pinioned him to the chair, before the harnesses were fastened; Sam's the gentle voice that guided him into the shadowy corridors where memory and fantasy mingled, only to be ripped apart by the endless, undeniable questions. It was like being turned into a periscope, a hollow tube through which other eyes could peer into his private thoughts.

"Please come with me."

Good Sam led him through the room while the others watched surreptitiously. In a moment they were outside, in bright sunlight and warm air. Deep booms carried over the hills and shocked the earth, presumably coming from the next camp; the entire countryside to the east, Michael had told him, was full of such camps and training grounds. This was the only area designated for the training of youths. P.J. was the oldest member of the camp, though the steady sessions of PSA interrogation had already begun to make him feel years younger than he actually was.

Thinking that he was even now bound for further injections, he started to lag behind. Good Sam turned toward him and drew back on his crooklike crosier as if it were a lever that would pull P.J. closer.

"Come, come, manchild. Curry your spirits, you've an adventure ahead of you." Good Sam's eyes seemed to glaze over as he lifted his head to the sky, and waved his arm slowly as if to banish the sun. "I can see you already, beside His throne, fingers flying. You'll be a great programmer . . . a warrior in your own right, Peter John.
We've decided it would be a pity to send you into mundane battle.
Yours will be a different field of honor."

That gave him a reason to walk more swiftly. No more weapons training, Sam must mean.

As they approached a low bunker he had not yet entered, a group of men near the administration quonset caught his eye. Three priests in uniform were helping a man out of a jeep that had parked only a moment before. It was this man who held his attention like the lurid metronome that clocked his descent into PSA nightmares. He was fascinated . . . but why?

"I'm waiting, Brother Johnson."

P.J. quickened his steps, knowing that he would get a closer look at the man that way. The quartet had paused by the jeep to chat, while the civilian gentleman brushed dust from his suit of pastel colors. It looked as though they would enter the administration building.

P.J. and Good Sam passed the men, close enough for his sense of strangeness to become almost claustrophobic. The civilian turned swiftly to look at the hills, where a series of rocket explosions had begun to sound. P.J.'s mind glinted with light from the past, a clue provoked by the man's profile, a shard of some whole image that had been shattered by the chemical shock of the recent past.

"Hey," he said aloud.

The man heard him and turned. His expression did not change when he saw P.J.: there was no recognition there. He looked back at the khaki ministers, made a comment at which they all laughed, and then they went into the hut.

"Ash," P.J. said to himself, for that was the most maddening part of the teasing his memory had given him: a name, or a fragment of one. And a moment later he, too, was taken into a hut.

"There it is, Peter John," said Good Sam. "It looks like an ordinary plug-in, I know, but you'll see how different it can be. Hurry, hurry! Slip it on. Plug yourself in. I'll leave you to it."

A cartoon sun beams into the projection room of his mind.

> Good day, Peter John. My internal clock tells me that you accessed this file within three seconds of seeing the selection-prompt.

An old-fashioned wall clock appears, with a three-second-wide pie-slice colored in red.

> Judging from your access time, you must be very familiar with IMR (or Ideomotor Response) information processing technology.

A contented operator typing in IMR gloves.

You are now ready for the next step in plug-in experience.

A bare foot spiked to a beam.

I am INRI Mark 2, the very latest thing.

A white rabbit checks its watch.

My name is an acronym for Ideoneural Reintegrator.

Human nerves and circuitry entwined, snapping and flashing in a cruciform pattern.

The big difference between IMR and INRI is feedback.

A hawk regurgitating into the mouth of a lamb.

With IMR, as you know, once you've learned to shut your eyes and visualize your motor responses sharply enough to give the motorstims synchronous signals, you're on your own.

A little girl in a forest regards a sign pointing all directions at once.

You have to tell the IMR everything you want it to do: choose your own path through your program. But with INRI Mark 2, the program chooses you.

A giant finger points at hammer and nails in a carpentry shop.

I pay close attention to the nature of your psychic and psychological composition—

A murky pool.

The better to hasten your proficiency as an INRI integrator.

A radiant superman, crowned with a shining halo.

The longer you work with me, the more finely we will mesh.

Fish wriggling in a net.

I will quicken your responsiveness—

Jesus slaps back.

Increase your accuracy—

A rattlesnake strikes.

And most of all, strengthen your moral fiber.

A glowing loaf of golden bread.

Shall I tell you about my programs? At ease, get comfortable, soldier.

A comfortable parlor appears, hors d'oeuvres set out on a coffee table. But there is no way to touch them.

Have you ever heard of a saint named Ignatius Loyola?

An enormous question mark wipes out the parlor.

My, you have quick fingers, but you can speak to me if you wish. Your speech centers are linked to my processor, so you won't be speaking out loud. A simple no would be sufficient. In any case, Loyola practiced a crude form of ideoneural reconditioning in the old days before silicon-based genetistry made INRI technology possible.

Cro-Magnon man tries to splice genes with a stone ax and sinew.

He could make his thoughts as vivid to his mind's eye as the scenes of a PI program are to the visual centers of your brain.

A television screen in the middle of a brain.

All Ignatius had to do was close his eyes and he could enter his psychic program. In those days, people could still use their imaginations.

Lascivious images, swiftly censored.

It's almost as if INRI is what human evolution has been getting at all along.

An arrow strikes the bullseye.

Surprised to hear the word "evolution" around here? We're all products of science.

Sacred heart on a Petri plate.

And there's no getting away from that.

Running in place on Teflon.

Here's a picture of Saint Ignatius for you to cherish. I generated it myself.

A man with curly red hair and a gentle smile, wearing a ragged black robe, sits in a filthy street with his eyes closed.

He's meditating now. You can make all the noise you like but it won't disturb him.

Horse-drawn carts rattle past, followed by a parade of clowns and children and barking dogs.

Note his spiritual calm.

Slow zoom between clowns, closing in on Loyola's twitching eyelids.

Let's take a peek at his visual centers and see what's brewing behind that noble brow.

Zoom continues, passes under red-lashed eyelids: a flash of blue pupils, then darkness and a brightening asterisk just ahead . . .

He found himself in the center of a roaring brawl. Dust and feathers clouded the air, animals screeched and brayed. As the dust settled, he sank back with his attention centered in his soft belly— the calm in the midst of the storm. His gentle, savage hands hung at his sides.

"We've got you now, Jesus!" someone shouted.

Four lepers came wailing out of the dust.

"Die, Jewboy!" shrieked the nearest, swinging a crowbar to which several fingers of his free hand adhered.

P.Jesus moved swiftly, effortlessly, and hardly felt the crunch of the leper's jaw against his sandal's sole. The cripple went down sputtering, scrabbling for the scattered pieces of himself, while P.Jesus sprang to avoid the switchblade thrust by leper number two. His clean white hand caught the knife blade along its flat edge and deftly squeezed it shut on the leper's fingers; the poor brute gibbered and scuttled away even as the savior wheeled to disarm his third assailant.

As he whirled, as he leapt, his mind began to fragment. P.Jesus's consciousness shone outward: four rays. Lepers three and four went down into dust and manure, and before they could rise to join the first pair, his mind had redistributed its burden of awareness. He was no longer merely P.Jesus, but P.J.-Four-Lepers as well, both attackers and attackee. With eight foul eyes he watched the prim man in bone-white robes take the fighting stance known as the Tree of Death, while from the central point of view he watched and waited for the four lepers to make their next concerted move.

It should have been distracting, but it was such a strange sensation to be five men at once that he found himself sucked into the vision without confusion. Such was eternity: a single ray, diffracted endlessly, scattering like the lepers' fingers into muck and dust.

P.Jesus was overwhelmed with pity for P.J.-Four-Lepers; he became so softened by bathos that he nearly lost his resolve to save them from themselves. Yet at the same time he could loathe himself as the spotless white warrior: Who does he think he is, mincing in here saying he can heal us, getting our hopes up—

He felt moved to sermonize while he could. "Hold, brothers. You know, like, I can relate to leprosy."

His soothing words transformed the scene, smoothed the dust back into the gutters, restored each mote to its proper eye. The lepers dropped their weapons and crawled closer, although some had to shield their eyes from the radiance of the sun on bleached robes. P.J.-Four-Lepers could hardly keep themselves from rushing into that light, which threatened and promised to burn them to crisps.

"Come to me, brothers," said P.Jesus, and his words fell on four pairs of scabrous burning ears.

And they came, they came, each at his own hobbled speed, wallowing into the heart of whiteness, scuttling into the thermonuclear blaze at the center of the dream, the glory of a world that would never change again, forever and forever for all they knew, amen.

At the sound of their screaming, P.Jesus was frightened. They were touching him, merging with his flesh, smudging his robes. The screams were his as well. Their teeth—his teeth—tore into him. The flame consumed itself. He was eating them alive.

He would have asked why, but the light had no voice. There was nothing but the sound, the smell, the smoke of incineration.

Then a calm voice said, "Ah. I can see how it was. I can see how he wanted it to be."

The sun-spark goes out, the darkness draws in, the closed eyes dwindle, and the man with curly red hair smiles to himself as a passing mongrel lifts its leg beside him.

Of course, these visions are a bit historically inaccurate.

Tarnish spreads over the scene.

Saint Ignatius didn't really know much about biblical times. But we know quite a lot today; so much, in fact, that we have sharpened our understanding of God's purpose for us to an almost perfect edge.

Cleaver glints on grindstone.

New hope for salvation—

The INRI terminal.

New weapons against darkness—

Flare grenades exploding.

And a new translation of God's word—

The Good Block.

Have all combined to make the Christian Army the toughest and most reliable in the world.

Marching troops cover the globe.

And you, Peter John, are the latest proud addition to our fold.

Trumpets, a flourish.

Through INRI Mark 2 technology, your conversion will be complete and physically verifiable in a matter of weeks, without need for recourse to old-fashioned, hit-or-miss means to enlightenment.

Three strikes on a baseball scoreboard.

You will be born again, and I'm as sure of that as I am of my unmatched up-time. You will learn your lessons well from me, Peter John. You will become your lessons.

Man into book.

You will be freed from piffling moral ambivalence.

A leper's smile.

You will come to understand that you are right, and that only the right survive —not the wrong, not even the left. In this world there is room for nothing left.

A vast zero.

So welcome, Peter John, welcome to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Kettledrums pound, nearly shaking him from his seat, and a golden light dawns through breaking clouds. Before him is a vast landscape, golden citadels, lakes of liquid diamond, mountains soft as clouds. He rushes down on angel's wings, anticipation a palpable sensation. The air tastes like honey. How wonderful—

Like a dove striking a window, he hits an invisible wall, and falls. . .

Spinning.

Not so fast.

Down.

You haven't earned your stripes.

The seat hard and cold. His hands sweating in the gloves. A tiny blue message forming from the phosphenes in his eyes:

PLEASE SEE YOUR PASTOR
BEFORE ADVANCING TO NEXT LESSON

Dear Kids,

Grandma here. I know you don't often get to see handwriting these days—perhaps Virgil can read this note to the young ones. It's for the older kids, too. I thought a personal card would be a good way of giving you the news, better anyway than a printed statement from the Sunset Ranch Authority.

Your grandfather passed away last night. He was only in for his Treatment but they decided he was old enough and put him to sleep. His liver was bad from too much liquor, I guess. Besides, as Dr. Edison explains it, we have to clear away all the deadwood to make room for you fast-growing youngsters. There's only so much room in our neighborhoods, I know.

I'm at peace with our Dr. Edison's decision. (He's the identical twin of the doctor you all know.) If Grandpa had taken his Treatment, he might have turned out ill and cantankerous. This way I can remember him always as the kind, robust gentleman who even on the last day of his life insisted on steering to the clinic when the car would have done it for him. I'm sure your father can tell you many amusing stories about him.

Virgil, I will be attending your wedding, tho' alone. Warm up the guest bed if you will.
(Not with Wolfie, tho'—I'm still allergic!)

I am thinking about you all, especially my grandkids. You know my love goes out to Peter John, wherever he is.

OOOXXX,
Grandma

"All is well, Nancy June," said Dr. Edison. "Your mother is waiting to take you home."

As the sedatives wore off, before she could even sit up, she found the strength to say, "I hate you." Her tone of voice was a bit surprising to her, but she agreed with it. She did hate him. She hated this office, these mind-blurring sedatives that were not even as much fun as real drugs, the treatments that came practically without warning—marked only by a little pink postcard that said, "Dr. Edison's office would like to remind you that your child Nancy June is due for an Advancement by the end of this month. Community law requires that you make an appointment within twenty-four hours of receiving this notification, or else ..." She hated her mother for making those appointments, for not standing up to Dr. Edison and the neighborhood and its stupid, arbitrary laws. She was full of a whirlwind hate of everything that until now had seemed innocuous or, at the worst, merely annoying.

Dr. Edison must have been used to this sort of thing from sudden adolescents. He helped her out of her seat and into her mother's arms. She was too proud to rely on the older woman's support, but not strong enough yet to stand on her own. Her crippled walk from the office to the car was her first humiliating rite of passage into the murky trauma of puberty.

She could not bear to meet her mother's eyes. Exhausted, she lay back in the seat, closed her eyes, and waited for the interrogation.

"Well," said Mom after a moment, very tentatively, "how did it go?"

With clenched teeth and folded arms, under full protest, she spat out the words, "Just fine!"

"Did you get your period?"

"Mom!" she said, blushing.

"Dr. Edison said we could expect it immediately."

"Even if I did, I wouldn't tell you."

"And why not?"

"I don't have to tell you anything," she said, in what she hoped was a withering tone. "I'm not your slave." "Well!" said Mom.

Nancy allowed her eyes to open a fraction, just enough to let her see the traitor who had recently been her best friend. It was hard now to recall the happy mother-and-daughter banter of earlier days —or even of that morning. She wondered how she could ever have wanted to imitate such a glossy, vacuous doll. It was just as Arnold had said: her mother was programmed to behave in certain ways, and one of the things she was best at doing was perpetuating the same programming in her daughters.

When I get home, she thought, I'll take off all my makeup. I won't dissolve the dishes, or turn on the vacuum, or recycle Dad's socks, or any of that . . . that slavery!

While the car was backing into the garage like a skittish lobster, Mom said, "You might consider behaving properly, young lady, or else forget about going to Yosemite with the rest of us."

"Why would I want to go anyway?" Nancy said. "What's in a stupid Yosemite plug-in that I would care about? You can go and leave me home, for all I care. It's not like I can't take care of myself for fifteen minutes."

She was pleased to see Mom get angry when her punitive tactics, designed for dealing with a younger girl, were suddenly rendered useless.

"You are going to Yosemite!" Mom shouted, holding down the dashboard auto-lock override button so that Nancy could not escape now that the car had stopped. "This is a family trip, and you're not going to spoil it with your attitude."

"We're not a family," Nancy said drily. "Nothing's the same with P.J. gone, and you know it. You'll just be nostalgic wishing he was there."

Mom stared ahead at the closing garage door, face white, immobile. Suddenly she looked old, older than Nancy had imagined her own mother could get. There were lines in her face: not smilelines but sad ones, lines of pain, deepening even as she watched. When Mom spoke, her voice was weak, ghastly, the sound of a stranger.

"This trip is a gift to Virgil," she said. "It will be the last time you see Virgil as your brother."

"He'll always be my brother," Nancy said, more gently than before.

"No, he'll be different when he has a wife, Nancy June. They always are."

The locks clicked up and Nancy slipped out of the car. There were servicemen in the garage, working on the space where Dad was having the nuke put in.

As she stepped into the kitchen, she heard a growl and looked down to see Erica backed into a corner on her belly, clutching at her with one leaden blue-gray arm.

"What's she doing on the floor?" Mom said.

The sitter, a teenaged girl from down the street, appeared in the doorway to the den, her fingers at her mouth. "Mrs. Johnson? I—I'm sorry, she wouldn't stay in her bassinet. She bit me . . . wouldn't let me get near her."

Mom swept up her youngest daughter and delivered a dull slap to her fat metallic thighs. The baby's roar was awful. Nancy pulled away from the commotion, thinking of her mother's swiftly aging face, her own turbulent passage from childhood to whatever lay beyond, and the aggressive baby who every day looked more gray than blue. She saw the three of them as a chain, and the thought of a weak link hounded her. How could I think of breaking it? she wondered, guilty at the memory of her own contrariness. We Johnson women have to stick together.

Upstairs, she packed her teddy bears into boxes and stacked them in her closet against the day that Erica might want them, unlikely as that seemed. The baby did not have what Nancy considered normal interests, even for an infant. She liked to eat dirt, which was typical, but she seemed too restless to pay attention to anything else. She was constantly prowling the house, scratching at the doors, her gray knees leaving scuff marks on the synoleum floors. She always tried to writhe out of the arms of anyone who held her.

Nancy paused, her arms full of dolls. The weakness she had felt in Dr. Edison's office had returned. Nausea forced her onto the bed. She sprawled there, holding the edges as though clinging to a raft, weeping. It felt like her limbs were being pulled from one another; she felt her pores gape like the mouths of fishes out of water, felt sebaceous glands squirt oil, all part of the Edison-orchestrated enzymatic quickening, an upwelling of internal activity that was rising at last from the cellular level to that of her everyday consciousness. Like some kind of were-teenager, she could feel herself changing—but knew that this would not pass with the waning of the moon. Every dendrite itched unbearably, in ways impossible to relieve. She thrashed and screamed, and hardly heard the knocking on her door, or the voice of her mother who sank down beside her to hold her forehead.

"My little girl," Mom whispered. "My little girl is growing up."

***

The nuke was a beaut, Dad thought. The bright silver waist-high dome was shiny and flawless except for the smudged handprints of the installers who had finished their job only hours before. Now it sat purring and gurgling in the space that had been cleared for it, lovingly, beneath the storage cabinets in the back of the garage, next to the Bestinhouse recycler. The door to the back yard was ajar, and a hose ran through the gap until such time as permanent pipes could be put in; that was the only awkward detail in an otherwise perfect installation. The placement plans for other pipes had been blue-chalked onto the walls.

When Dad thought of the savings he would reap, he could not help but grin. It was a vision as enthralling as that of the home nuke before him.

Erica was at least as fond of it as he was. Connie had laid out a blue blanket at the base of the unit, where the garage was now quite warm and shielded from drafts, and there she played, seeming content for the first time since her birth. There were plastic toys around her, but none seemed to interest her as much as the empty container in which the first supply of reactor fuel pellets had been stored. She put the little bottle up to her nose and snuffled like a dog; then she stuck her gray-blue tongue and several fingers down inside, so that it looked as though she had trapped some kind of marine animal in there.

One of the nuke's tanks made a churning sound. Erica sat up straighter, dropped the bottle, and tried to imitate the noise. She put out a hand and patted the smooth metal shell, cooing.

"That's my girl," Dad said, hunkering down, or intending to. His knees shot sparks up his legs, setting fire to the pit of his stomach. Half-crippled by the gout of flame, he stumbled toward the humming dome, only to see Erica turn on him at a terrific speed, rear up, and bare her teeth.

Somehow he found his balance, and just in time. The kitchen door opened and Connie poked her head into the garage.

"Bill? The Blankenships are on the sidewalk. Can I let them in?"

Recovered now, he glanced at Erica. She had settled back to watch him warily over the rim of the bottle she was chewing.

"Oh, sure," he said. "I invited them."

"You didn't tell me. The house is a wreck."

"Well it's not like I planned a party . . . I'm not a gloating braggart like Jock Smith. I only asked a few couples to stop by and see my—uh, this thing." He had almost said "my baby," but the words, all too recently, had been Jock's. "Gary B. will probably be the next to put in his own nuke. I don't think he'll stand for being in my shadow too long."

Connie had already gone to answer the door. He walked over to Erica, stepping gingerly to make sure that his legs had cooled down. As he approached the nuke, he felt his body hair prickling, as though a static charge were making it stand out toward the dome; there
was a corresponding sensation of rushing-about in his blood, but in the opposite direction.

Dad heard laughter in the kitchen, and the sound of beer spilling into glasses. He went to the door and found Gary Blankenship bearing down on him, his blond mustache dripping white foam, one hand held out in a beer-bearing greeting. Dad took the cold glass and let that suffice as a handshake. He was surprised, after the manly ritual was complete, to see that Blankenship looked visibly nervous, even weak, like an anemic cowpoke.

"That, uh, that it in there?" he asked, his voice squeaking up at the end.

"That's it," Dad said. He clapped Gary on the shoulder, turning him toward the door, and made an inclusive gesture to scarecrow Nada Blankenship, who waited in a far corner of the kitchen, holding her tall beer in stick-thin fingers. Her expression was one of panic, but Dad refused to let that stop him from smiling at her.

"Come on," he said. "You, too."

Gary went into the garage and stopped, blocking the door.

"Come on, Gare, there's plenty of room. I moved up the Venturon so we'd have a clear path. How do you like her?"

Erica had dropped her toys to concentrate on the adults. She backed up protectively until her feet were touching the dome.

"She's cute," Nada said, sounding strangely relieved. "You didn't tell us she was such a little doll, Connie." "Best they make," Dad said.

"She means Erica," said Connie.

"Also the best they make, and our finest little safety feature. Our little bumpkin here eats the waste from the nuke. Doc Edison handled the specifications."

"Nice," Gary said doubtfully. Dad saw the sweat on his high forehead, but decided not to comment on it. When he saw Gary's free hand dangling obtrusively over his groin, he could not help but chuckle.

"You think you can stop radiation with a hand if it really wants to get you?"

Gary looked down, paled, and pulled the hand away. He covered his embarrassment with a wisecrack, jerking his thumb at the nuke.
"That's all there is to it, huh?"

"Big things, little packages," Dad said. "You want to see it up close?"

He urged Gary forward and heard Nada gasp. Erica, on all fours, lowered her head and raised her rear like a junkyard dog. Dad drew back.

"It's that safe, huh?" asked Gary.

"Safe? Of course it's safe. You should see the hazard studies they did on this site, Gare." Dad ticked them off on his fingers.
"Earthquake danger, aircraft crash, fire, tidal wave, you name it. I've got a figure somewhere estimating the probability of a meteorite coming into our garage—a meteorite big enough to do damage, that is. A little one could whiz right in and flatten the recycler without doing a thing to the nuke."

"Gosh," Nada said, but she didn't look as though that was what she meant. Her smile would have looked fitting on a skull.

"Oh, Nada," Connie said suddenly, "did you see the shawl pattern in The Ladies' Home Video?"

"Why, no," Nada said. "The latest release? I haven't watched it yet, but I am dying to take a look."

They closed the kitchen door behind them, leaving the men alone. Again Dad experienced the sensation of having his hair stand up and point at the nuke unit. He wondered if Gary could feel it.

"You know, Bill, the Hirams are moving farther down the street." Blankenship didn't look at Dad when he said it. He looked at the door instead. "They don't like living so close to your nuke."

Hiram? Dad thought. It was the first he had heard of it. They had been next-door neighbors for years. Come to think of it, no one ever moved in Cobblestone Hill or Laurel Woods. You had your house for life. That was the way it was, had always been.

"Is it Smith?" he shouted, his voice vibrating the spokes of the kids' bicycles. "I've had about enough of his propagandizing—"

"It wasn't Jock, Bill. We all talked it over. You know Hiram." He gulped at his beer, drained it, and fortified said, "Could be he's yellow."

"Damn right," Dad said, slightly comforted.

"We're pulling for you, Nada and me."

"Good to hear, Gary. Appreciate it. I always knew you'd be the first one to follow my lead and get your own nuke. I know I never talked to you about it all that much, but I could tell by the quiet, reasoning look in your eye that you had it all thought out."

Gary nodded. He looked more comfortable around the nuke now —positively bold. "Sure. I figure to give it a year or two, wait and see how this works out for you."

"What? A year? Blankenship, you're a menace to progress."

The other man laughed, and Dad believed that he had been mistaken. He was about to sharpen his point and press it, but he noticed that the kitchen door had yawned open an inch or so, and an eye was peering through. "Who is that?" he said. "Arnold?" The door opened all the way.

"Hey," Arnold said, and stepped in. He looked past Dad and Gary Blankenship, right at the nuke. Dad heard Erica growl; too many strangers, he thought.

"I came to see Nancy," Arnold said in his new deep voice. "She's still asleep. Mind if I take a look at the nuke, Bill?"

"No, I don't mind." Calling me "Bill" now, is he? Dad thought. I sure hope we haven't got another teen rebel on our hands. "I was just telling Blankenship here about the nature of progress, Arnold. You agree, don't you? We need more order in our community, more of the good old straight-ahead get-go."

"There's something to be said for anarchy," Arnold said, and he stopped to stare at Dad. It was a cold stare, merciless, too mired in adolescence for Dad to understand completely: but he did feel the threat in it. There was no mistaking that. It completely undermined any innocent interest in the nuke.

"I mean, look at it, Bill." Arnold sneered. "I'm sorry: Mr. Johnson. You're always extolling the virtues of order, but you seem to be most comfortable in the middle of chaos; and the mess you like best, I notice, is the one you make yourself."

Dad did not know what to say.

"I think it's time you ran along, Smith," said Gary Blankenship, stepping between Dad and Arnold as though he might have to break up a fistfight.

"It's all right, Gary," Dad said. "Come here, Arnold."

No part of Arnold moved except his chin, which budged an inch closer.

"You kids grow up fast these days," Dad said. "But all Doc Edison's shots can't give you wisdom." "I figured this out for myself," Arnold said.

"Figuring isn't wisdom—it's only figuring."

"Oh yeah?" Arnold said, but suddenly he couldn't meet Dad's eyes.

"I know when to keep in line," Dad said gently, even tenderly, "and when to step out of it. That takes timing, which you haven't got yet."

Arnold swallowed, red-faced.

Dad took a step forward. "I understand that it's—"

"You don't understand a thing!" Arnold yelled, and he turned from the men and rushed back into the house.

Dad smiled at Gary, shrugged.

"Another screwed-up Smith," Gary said, shaking his head.

"Don't be too hard on the kid. He's had it rough, with Jock for a father. But he's on our side, Gary." Dad wagged a finger. "Keep that in mind. He's a good one to have on your side."

Five minutes earlier, Connie and Nada had just seated themselves on the living room couch. "Oh, Nada," Connie began, and then the doorbell rang. "Damn it."

She checked the screen by the door and saw that it was Arnold, out on the sidewalk, pressing the bell that was mounted on the ornamental mailbox; at least he didn't come in without knocking — that drove Bill up the wall. He was a gangly boy, and had hardly any clothes that fit him, though the Smiths' recycler should have taken care of that. It would be like Jock to work for months on his missiles and forget to call in a service order on the Bestinhouse.

"It's the prince come to visit Sleeping Beauty," she told Nada as she let him in. "Hello, Arnold. She's still upstairs in bed. Maybe she'll wake up for you."

Arnold did not say a word to her but hurried up the stairs looking grim.

"You're so lucky to have your kids," Nada said when Connie came back to the couch. "I know they're trouble, and I do appreciate not having to clean up after anyone but Gary. Still, I sometimes wish we could have even one."

Connie felt uncomfortable discussing the legal vagaries of birth. Some people were given permission, some weren't. It was as simple as that.

"Aren't you afraid of what that nuke might do to your eggs, Connie?"

Connie sipped her coffee. "Goodness, no. They're all in the bank."

"Of course. I don't suppose a little radiation would give you anything quite as . . . unusual as Erica." Nada put a reassuring hand on Connie's knee. "Forgive me if I'm rude, Connie, but she doesn't look exactly natural."

"I guess not."

Nada moved closer, looking perplexed. "Is something wrong?"

She shrugged. "I don't think so. When you talk about children, though, it reminds me of when Bill and I were planning the family. We could talk about anything then. I don't know what he's after these days, Nada."

"Oh, Connie, he hasn't come up with another weird scheme for you two has he? No two-headed monsters?"

Connie laughed, but it was halfway to a sob. "No, nothing like that. His new plans don't have much to do with me; I think that's part of it. He's so political that I can't talk to him. I'm hoping it will be better when we take our vacation—he'll relax and be more himself. He'll . . . stop drinking so much. It's like there's nothing to him when he drinks, nothing inside."

Nada's hand felt warm and supportive. It had been so long since she had talked to anyone who understood. Doris wouldn't talk to her anymore. She gave a terrific sigh, thankful that Nada didn't rush to fill her silences.

"Since P.J. ran away," she said, "he's been losing interest in the rest of the family. He used to think of it as his business, you know. Every shopping trip was an investment, he was chairman of the board, the family manager. Now he's beyond all that. He wants to organize the whole community around his nuclear plant; he wants everyone to look up to him so he can straighten them out, but he can't even handle his own household."

"The neighborhood is changing," Nada said. "You can feel it. The Hirams are moving, did you know?"

"No!" Connie understood instantly: the Johnson garage was next to the Hirams' master bedroom. She felt stricken. "Oh God, Nada, I'm losing my friends, too? I can handle losing my mind, even my husband—but not my friends."

She began to cry. Nada hugged her close.

"You know what I think you need?" Nada whispered. "You'd feel better if you weren't so wrapped up in Bill. Maybe you need a good old-fashioned affair."

"Oh God," Connie said, and had to laugh. "With who? Who'd want to be with William D. Johnson's old wife?"

"Well, how about turning the tables on a certain someone? I bet
Jock Smith would like the idea." Connie choked. "That's ghastly!"

"I'm only joking, Connie. About Jock, that is. I'm serious about an affair, though. With the right man. It would help you improve your image of yourself."

Connie felt a little better. "Maybe," she said. "With the right man."

"That's the spirit. See how you perked up?"

She was already wondering how it might happen when Arnold came into the living room, swearing. He must have been back in the den or the garage because he came from the kitchen.

"Somebody let me out of this place," he said.

"Did she wake up for you?" asked Connie, going to the door to disengage the locks.

"No, but when she does, boy, am I going to open her eyes."

She watched him go down the path, shaking her head. "I wonder how much longer they'll be together. Bill would never let the two of them get married, not feeling the way he does about Jock. It's time to start looking for another boyfriend, I guess."

"Hm," Nada said. "For you, too. I'll ask around."

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Nancy's fever lasted thirty-six hours, during which time she was occasionally aware of one or more members of her family gathered over her.

"This is the big one," Dad's voice echoed out of measureless caverns. "Puberty. The difficult years. I remember it well."

"When did you get your first period, Daddy?" asked Lady Bird, and their voices drizzled away into cackles of insane clownish laughter.

Once Nancy dreamed that Arnold was standing over her with a handful of blue glowing pellets, an insane leer, and an erection. She pulled the covers over her head, but she was interested. Bombs and sex. Real sex, not the playful puppying they had engaged in up until now: they could start planning their own family, collecting sperm and ova and dreaming up specifications. Real bombs, too. But after the bombs would there be any sex? Any ovens or refrigerators?

"Arnold," she said, feeling a probing hand, "you better not."

"Come on, Nan, it's only Virgil."

She sat up suddenly, uncovering her face, and realized that the walls had stopped breathing. Her bloodstream no longer effervesced adolescence. She was well again.

Virgil sat by her bed, a book in his hand. "I've been playing nurse," he said. "How are you feeling? You look better."

"I feel great," she said, which was true. "Do you want to go to the beach?"

"Not so fast," he laughed. "You should see yourself."

She swung out of bed and went to a mirror; it was a few inches too low for her now. The reflection looked familiar, but she had changed. Her face was thinner, spotted with acne from which she first cringed, then leaned closer to inspect.

"Doctor Edison said you should take two of these the moment you woke up." He came up behind her with a bottle of pills. "So how does it feel? The new you."

"I'm not sure," she said, listening to her voice, which was hoarse as though she'd been shouting; it creaked like a badly played violin, but it had potential. "I guess I'll get used to it." "And as soon as you have, it'll be time for the next treatment." Virgil shook his head and turned away. "It reminds me of my puberty. I didn't know what the hell was happening. Voice breaking, hair shooting out all over the place, all these—these weird emotions. I didn't know what to do with myself."

Still looking at herself, Nancy shrugged. "I just feel like going to the beach."

"I still don't know what to do," Virgil said, so quietly that she wasn't sure that she had heard him. "I'm getting married next week, Nan, you realize that? I—I don't feel ready. As soon as I get used to anything, everything changes. How is it going to change when I'm living with Elaine?"

"Aren't you excited? I would be."

"It would be different for you."

He looked incredibly depressed. She shook him by the shoulders.

"Cheer up."

"I'm giving up my studies," he said, not looking at her. "No more poetry, no more books. I'll plug in every morning, like all the other husbands, and sit at a desk somewhere in the bowels of a program. No more books." He looked up at her, his eyes pleading; but what could she do? "That's the worst thing, I think. I always wanted to have a library."

"Why can't you?"

Suddenly his eyes cleared; he looked embarrassed. "It's good to have someone to talk to, Nancy, now that you're older I mean. You don't mind do you?"

"Of course not, Virgil." She sat next to him.

He sighed. "When I get married, I'll be too old to buy books legally. They're only legal for studying when you're young, and even then it's difficult to get them. Pretty soon I'll be a consumer, and there are purchase controls. I can buy all the weapons I want, sure, but books are bad for the economy."

"You're too pessimistic," she said. "Do you want to go to the beach or not?"

"I'm depressed," he said. "You go. If I see my boat, I'll probably cry."

"Maybe you should," she said, and hugged him. "I hope you cheer up for Yosemite."

"I'm sure I will." He tried to smile. "It will be beautiful in there."

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"Okay!" Dad called from the garage. "If you have to use the john do it now!"

Nancy closed the closet door where she had tucked Junior in for his nap; he would sleep for the duration of their trip—all of fifteen minutes—and if he woke up there were auto-pacifiers and food nipples aplenty in the cabinet. Erica was also too young to come along, but she never wandered from her post by the nuke.

Nancy ducked back into her bedroom to grab a sweater, in case it was cold in the garage, then she ran down the stairs to join the others. Virgil was just going into the garage, Mom had Stephanie on her leash, and the twins were piling into the Venturon. Dad pinched Nancy on the arm as she went through—"How's my little lady?"—and stepped back into the kitchen to grab another beer.

Inside the Venturon there was a spacious shell fitted with deepfit sofas for the Johnson kids; Mom and Dad had separate seats at the front of the cabin, facing the console dashboard. Plug-in wires, gloves, and masks hung on hooks near the curtained windows. Nancy dropped down into her favorite cushion, Virgil took the next, and Mom strapped Stephanie in the sofa nearest her. The twins had gone back out again, and were playing in the garage. Dad turned back to yell at them as he teetered in the doorway, barely holding to the frame with one hand while beer dribbled from the can in the other.

"We're ready, you two!"

He lumbered over to his seat, shaking the whole van, and dropped down heavily. Connie made sure that Wolfie was out and that Lady Bird had gone to the bathroom, then strapped the twins in place.

Nancy stared past Dad's head at the closed garage door, amused to think that they would have to open it to drive a few blocks in the car, while in the Venturon they could go hundreds of miles without even leaving the garage.

She looked at P.J.'s empty couch, then away.

"Here goes," Dad said, and slipped the Yosemite program into the console.

Nancy pulled on her gloves, which were a little too tight, and then the mask, which barely fit. For a moment the darkness behind the eyesockets frightened her, and the pressure made her claustrophobic. But that passed, and she drifted in hazy anticipation of the journey, feeling herself falling, falling through dark clouds, then breaking into light. Below, the countryside was spread out to the curves of the world. All she could see was a black road, dotted down the center, dividing an endless green field. On the road, a shiny silver bug was moving, and as she got closer she could see the antennae swaying on its carapace. It was the Venturon. Down she went, swift as a diving gull, straight through the roof of the van, and with a pop her eyes sprang open and she found herself singing "The Wabash Cannonball" along with the rest of the family.

The interior of the Venturon had been rearranged. Instead of the deep-fit sofas, they sat on springy vinyl seats. Instead of a console, Dad had a steering wheel and a small keypad. There was a little gas stove, a trunk-sized refrigerator, cupboards full of paper towels and kitchen matches and plastic dishes. Magical bags of potato chips and cookies lay open on the little Formica table— magical because one could eat and eat and eat, barbecued potato chips and Hydrox cookies, and make no dent in the supply. It was also impossible to get sick. Plug-in vacations were the best.

As they sang "She'll Be Comin' Round the Mountain," Nancy felt a moment of disquiet, as though something snaky and invisible had invaded their happiness, a drift of soundlessness woven through their loud harmonies.

P.J., she thought. He should be here . . .

And glancing over at the table where P.J. always sat next to the window, she saw barbecued potato chips floating like burnt butterflies from the bag, drifting to a point at about face-level, and vanishing with stifled crunches. With a chill, she tried to turn to Virgil and point it out to him, but she found that her mouth kept singing and smiling, and she could not help herself from feeling happy. In a moment she had forgotten about the ghost-borne chips, and was content to play Twenty Questions.

The rest of the journey by Venturon passed like a series of excerpts, which it was. There were no tedious moments. One moment they were dawdling over the green expanse of fields, the next they were stretching their legs in a service station in the town of Merced, and suddenly they were on a winding road among tall pines. There were no other cars to be seen until they approached an information booth in the center of the road, and joined a line of campers and cars waiting to pass one at a time into the park.

A tall, pleasant park ranger in sunglasses gave them a map and told them to enjoy their stay, then they were on their way again, in the midst of a procession of visiting vehicles. Just as the road began to look crowded, a number of the other cars disappeared, leaving plenty of space between the remaining travelers.

"If I remember this road right," Dad said, "there's a lookout point just ahead."

Everyone fell quiet, crowding to the windows.

"There it is," Dad said a minute later. "Hold on, I'm pulling in."

They parked in a turnout with a stone wall around the perimeter, and joined the other tourists who had come out of their cars to sample the spring afternoon. Nancy walked up to the wall, which came about to her knees, and let out a gasp of wonder and joy—all part of the program.

A marvelous valley lay before her, much more realistic than in the photograph on the program packaging. Splendid white clouds waded through a steep-banked river of evergreens, between sheer granite faces that dominated all she could see. She had never seen a blue as deep and clear as that of the sky in this program: she thought she could almost see through it. But what lay beyond the reach of the blue? Infinity? The roof of their garage?

She heard a screech near her foot and looked down to see a bushy-tailed chipmunk approaching. A tribe of the critters, natives, had invaded the parking lot, and were now demanding placating offerings from the foreign tourists. Dad opened a box of Milk Duds, sprinkled them on the ground, and backed away as the chipmunks closed in, snarling and spitting at one another in their feeding frenzy.

"They sure are friendly little scamps," said an old graybeard in a corduroy hunting jacket and a coonskin cap. As he spoke, one chipmunk buried its fangs in the neck of a competitor for an outlying Milk Dud.

"Yep," Dad chuckled. "They sure are, old-timer."

He crumpled up the candy carton and tossed it toward the trees; it vanished before it hit the ground.

"You shouldn't litter out here, Dad," Virgil said, his voice slow and straining as he fought to get out words that went against the grain of the program.

"You saw what happened to that trash," Dad said with a wink, speaking easily. "Out here, nature lets us clear our errors."

"That's right, sonny," said the old-timer, banging his pipe on the heel of his boot. "Well, be seeing you folks in the valley, I reckon."

He climbed into a battered old camper, the sides of which were covered with decals from the Trees of Mystery, various plug-in national parks, and the National Rifle Association. The truck sputtered away down the winding road, coughing out fumes of black exhaust that vanished instantly, without dispersing.

"You can be sure that old guy knows his way around here," Dad said, sounding slightly awed. "What do you bet we run into him again?"

"He smelled bad, Daddy," Lady Bird said.

Dad turned quickly as the wind rose up and the sky seemed to darken, matching his troubled expression. Nancy stepped away from him, frightened for a moment, thinking with difficulty, Something is wrong!

"I'm sorry, Daddy," Lady Bird whispered, and jumped up into the Venturon, as if fleeing the lowering clouds. Mom took Dad's elbow and gave him a cautioning look.

A second later the weather was fine, welcoming them to the valley.

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The family faded in again to find itself in the parking lot of an enormous old hotel made of solid rock. Nancy climbed out of the Venturon, took a deep breath of pine-scented air, and heard Dad say, "The old Ahwahnee Hotel. My, my, it looks just like I remember. Isn't that something? Can you imagine the work that went into this program? Of course, the corporation that makes PI-Vacations also owns the valley, so they had plenty of access to the original." "You came here before, Daddy?" asked Lady Bird.

"Not here," said Virgil. "He went to the real Yosemite."

"That's right," Dad said. "It took hours of steady, boring driving to get here, and when we did the valley was full of people and their junk. It wasn't nearly as nice as this. I didn't stay in the hotel either —could hardly afford that. Now it's no problem. The cassette comes cheap."

"Wow," said Lyndon Baines, "you mean this is a real place?" "Was," Dad said. "The last I heard . . .

reservoir." "Like the Grand Canyon," said Virgil.

"Not quite," Dad said. "That's landfill now, I understand."

Nancy smiled at Virgil, glad that he was enjoying himself so thoroughly, thinking how she would miss having him around all the time once he was married. Well, at least P.J. would still be around.

She felt his hand on her arm, and turned to tell him— But he wasn't there.

"Peej?" she said.

A breeze stirred the conifers; bushes by the path waved their limbs; but there was no sign of Peter John. That was weird. Hadn't he been with them a moment ago?

"Hey," she said, louder, "where did P.J. go?"

"Naaan," Mom said, in the weird slowed-down voice that meant she was resisting the program. "Please . . . not here."

Slowly the memory came back to Nancy. P.J. was gone. He had not been here the whole time. It was hard to remember, so hard; it was much easier to forget about him and just have a good time.

Then the bushes by the path parted, pushed aside by an invisible body, and a pine cone came bobbing through mid-air until it hovered under her nose. She looked at it in horror—a grudging, very slow horror—then stared at the air beyond it. A little enamel souvenirshop pin, picturing Half Dome, was suspended there, rising and falling slightly in time to breathing she could only imagine. And though she could hear nothing, there was a peculiar silence like that which had crept into "Comin' Round the Mountain"; the void seemed to say the exact opposite of, "Look what I found, Nancy!"

Before Nancy could scream—which might have been impossible in this program—Dad stepped up and snatched the pine-cone from the air, moving as slowly as though he were walking through sludge. He glared at the spot in mid-air where P.J.'s face was not, then threw the cone off over a green lawn where several old people were sunning in wheelchairs.

"There's no one there, Dad," Lyndon said. He laughed, apparently enjoying the increasingly deep tone of his voice.

Dad was breathing hard, but it only lasted an instant. Apparently he resolved whatever problem he was having, for his face became unclouded, even blank.

"I understand," he said jovially, returning to normal. "I forgot to reprogram the Venturon central processor. It was set to treat us as a family: as far as it knows, P.J. is still receiving his part of the program. We're seeing an empty glove." Dad hit himself on the forehead. "I guess we're just going to have to get used to it."

Nancy felt a little better, but not much. It was the first time she could remember anything the least bit upsetting happening on a plug-in vacation.

Turning away from P.J.'s absence was as sad as abandoning a pet, but there was no resisting the program when all she really wanted was to have a nice time. She followed her family into the lodge, and easily fought the urge to look back and see if the little souvenir pin had come along.

The interior of the hotel put Nancy into a daze, it was so beautiful. She wished that Arnold could be there with them, so that they might stroll slowly down the dark halls like the other elegant couples. The sound of tinkling crystal and silverware came from behind the huge double doors of the dining room, as though the waiters were playing chimes. She finally sat down in a cushioned chair and watched her parents at the reservation desk, where they had been waiting for the program's equivalent of ten minutes. Virgil had gone to look around. How wonderful to stay here for a week, when only fifteen minutes were passing in the outer world.

"Where did that man go?" she heard her mother whispering.

"Hell if I know," Dad said. He slammed his hand on the silver bell for service, and the sound was as deep as the tolling of cathedral bells. "Let'ssss havvvvvvve sommmmmmmmmme servisssssssss!"

Nancy slipped out of her seat and joined her parents. "What's wronnnnng?" she asked.

"Don't say that," Mom said. "Nothing's wrong. Everything's wonderful. Aren't you having a wonderful time?"

"I guess, only—" She broke off to watch the reservation clerk returning from his office. He looked very pleased about something.

In a perky voice, he said, "I'm delighted to tell you, Mr. and Mrs. Johnson, that we can find no record of your reservation, and the hotel is booked through the season."

"No record?" Dad shouted. "We made reservations in . . . why, it was . . ." He threw out his arms, striking the bell again. "We don't even need reservations, goddamn it, we paid for the program!"

Nancy was proud of Dad for a moment, because he seemed to have broken through the error-correction capacity of the program; he was complaining openly, at normal speed.

The clerk looked dubious. "Program, sir?"

"This one. The program you, my man, are in. Now I want rooms for my family, and I want them now. In nanoseconds, understood?"

Smiling hugely. "I'm sure that is quite impossible. If you would like to stay in the valley tonight, I suggest you contact the concession-camp agency immediately. In fact, they might already be full."

"I'll do nothing of the sort," Dad said, leaning over the counter. "If you don't give us the rooms that are reserved for us on this cassette, the rooms for which I have already paid, I will personally climb over there and break you into the bits that make you up, you cheap recording."

"Sir, it is not my fault. You would have to talk to the management."

"Fine. Why don't I just do that, hm?"

The clerk bowed slightly, showing teeth as he laughed. "Right away, sir. Would you like to come with me?"

He lifted a panel at the side of the desk to allow Dad through, then rapped on a door behind the counter. Nancy watched her father rise to his full height and set his eyes smoldering. Mom turned to her with a weak smile and patted her wrist. "Don't worry, dear, your father will—"

Dad's scream was completely silent—censored from the program before it could disturb anyone—but it drew all of their attention. Virgil and the twins came running from wherever they had been. Nancy saw the clerk easing the door shut against the palm of his hand, in order to make no sound; he faced the whole family with a prim smile. Dad staggered backward, face white, mouth slack, eyes blank; his hands scrabbled to raise the panel that let him out from behind the desk, and once he was out he grabbed Mom's arm and jerked her along with him. Stephanie's leash snapped taut, and she flew after.

"Dad?" Virgil called. He looked at Nancy, who shrugged, and then each of them grabbed a twin by the hand and ran after their parents down the long hall toward the Venturon.

"Good luck with the cabins," the clerk called after them. "I'm sure they're all taken by now."

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Dad rummaged through the icebox in the van, and finally came up with a can of beer. He sucked down half of it before he could talk. Slouched in his seat, his face drenched in perspiration, he finally began to mumble of what he had seen—or not seen.

"It was nothing," he said, his words conveying the impression of something much worse than that. "Like a pit, a big erasure . . . gray and burnt-out . . . wiped away. My God. I thought that prissy little clerk was going to lead me in by the hand, or push me over the brink. I don't know what would have happened. I had the idea I was about to vanish."

"It is the program," Virgil said. "Something's wrong, Dad."

"You're telling me? They lost our reservations."

They had no trouble speaking of their unease now. Nancy felt as though they had stepped out of the program altogether, except that they were still here in the valley.

"Oh, Virgil," Mom said, "I'm so sorry this had to happen during your special trip."

"Don't worry about it, Mom. It's no problem." He put an arm around her. "All we have to do is run a diagnostic program and see where the problem is. The chances are good we can fix it in no time. We might have to get out of here for a few minutes, that's all. We could come back to the valley before things started getting funny,
and check into the hotel all over again. You see?" Mom smiled. "Well, I guess." "He's right,

Connie," Dad said.

"Let's run the diagnostic first," Virgil said. "No sense leaving the valley if we don't have to."

Dad let him into the front seat, to get at the console. Virgil leaned over the display board. "See, it's—"

Nancy heard him suck in his breath. She went forward to see what had caused it, and soon they were all crowded around him.

"What's wrong, hon?" Mom asked.

"The keypad is gone." Virgil's voice was flat—not slowed down, only flat. "Do you see that? It—it's just not there." Nancy strained her eyes trying to look straight at the dashboard where the keypad had been; somehow her vision just slipped around the area and her eyes focused on nothing. It was like having a blind spot. The keys might have been there: she couldn't see them, that was all.

"Are you sure they're not there?" Mom said. "It could be glare on the dashboard, Virgil."

"Funny glare," Nancy said.

"You all see that?" said Dad. "Whew, I thought that last beer had done me in. It's . . . what are you doing, Virg?"

Virgil was reaching toward the spot with one hand, but slowly. He paused and looked at Dad. "I'm just going to see if I can feel it.
Maybe it's an optical illusion."

"Hm," Dad said. "It's like what I saw in that office, Virgil."

"Yeah." Virgil smiled. "That's probably it. We're having problems with the visuals. I bet I can start the diagnostic by touch."

He reached into the area where sight could not follow, and his wrist appeared to bend the way a spoon seems to warp in a glass of water. Nancy felt a little sick. She watched his face change. One moment he looked sure of himself, the next he was completely baffled.

"Nothing," he said. "It goes right through."

"To where?" said Nancy. "Virgil, what's wrong?" He shook his head and pulled out his hand.

"Oh my God," said Dad.

Virgil opened his mouth to scream, but nothing came out. The whole scene gave a little jiggle, vanquishing that open look of terror, and Nancy saw her brother smiling at all of them as though there were nothing wrong at all, nothing in the world—wherever that was. He smiled as if he had always had a blank spot, an optical stump, instead of a hand.